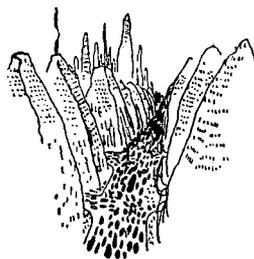

NOTES & TOPICS

Letter from New York

American After-thoughts



NO-ONE imagines that what Elizabeth Hardwick calls "the weird chaos of American life" can ever be summarised, nor its endless contradictions and paradoxes resolved. Nothing so grandiose: the problem is to define some

excitement and tension of the place, its curious mixture of anxiety and over-confidence, violence and apathy, glimmer and filth. Clearly, whatever it is you are looking for you can find. And the foreigner, his view coloured and shifted by those three thousand miles of ocean, is looking for something that probably doesn't much concern the Americans themselves. You come to the States, as Lawrence said, to get away. Travel may or may not broaden the mind, it certainly unbinds the fantasies. So part of your reactions are qualified by that sudden access of emotional freedom that comes when you simply clear out.

With partiality, then, and a great deal of projection, I find the seductiveness of the States in its combination of these ambiguous virtues: loneliness, energy and independence.

Loneliness: It is a continual, almost palpable quality which the country gives off like a heat shimmer. It is no less present in the utter separateness and indifference of city life, the blank size of the buildings, the self-sufficiency of the different ethnic ghettos, than in the deserts and mountains of the South-west. It is not made less for an instant by that terrible friendliness, mass produced, pre-packaged, frozen, that coos at you from every T.V. screen and billboard. Rather, this false coziness—instant Doris Day—accentuates the loneliness precisely because it is mass produced, a convention as chilling and formal as diplomatic protocol. Perhaps it is this style of friendliness without human sympathy that helps to make the Americans so wary of any organised welfare: in a certain light—that, perhaps, cast by a million television screens—social benevolence looks much like contempt.

Energy: This, too, is part of the physical presence of the country, an aspect of its power,

wealth, and drive to excel. When Robert Lowell calls American society "sheer" and Norman Mailer calls it "totalitarian" both are referring to those monster organisations that seem to control, though often in a benign, soft-selling way, so much of the American life. Yet they were also referring to something more subtle and pervasive, something that has perhaps more to do with the probing, dramatic architecture by which the Corporations create one aspect of their public image. It is the same quality as appears in the passionate self-absorption of private life, the unwavering drive to do what you must flat out. There is a continual, impatient nerviness about people, which has less to do with passion than exacerbation. It is at one with that sense of violence which, as Norman Podhoretz says, "trembles so constantly and ubiquitously below the surface of the life we lead." It's also at one with the continual tension of intelligence which controls the tone of the best American arts, an unrelaxing energy of the imagination and intellect. This may at times seem battering, bull-headed and, to the arts, paradoxically insensitive—Lowell calls it "a monotony of the sublime"—but it strikes me as preferable to the Englishman's habitually wan caution and cult of the amateur.

Independence: In a way, this is a combination of the controlling loneliness and energy of American life, which in turn have a cause-and-effect relationship: the energy is released because people essentially leave each other alone to get on with their own isolated lives; there is great envy, greater competitiveness but peculiarly little interference. American life seems run by a principle of psychic segregation, though not so much separate and equal as separate and driven. This touches some nerve in the American tradition of independence which began with the Declaration and is embodied in the whole concept of democratic equality, and in the doctrines of individual grace, salvation, revelation. It is present more potently still in the non-idealist thrust of successive generations of immigrants, seeking the worldly salvation of a successful new life in a successful new country. And this, as Murray Kempton suggested, means "parricide," the utter obliteration of all background and tradition. Tradition, it is implied, begins now and with us.

In the arts, Harold Rosenberg has called this "the tradition of the new"; another title would be the tradition of traditionlessness. Nothing can be assured; each newcomer of power and ambition feels he has to re-invent his art for himself from scratch, endowing it with his own forms, conventions, language and metaphysics. It is fundamentally a matter of inventing himself, endowing himself with an identity; it also

involves, in one degree or another, re-inventing his own society.

THIS BRAND OF CARE and attention for the inner life is a luxury product, a result of the material ease and relative wealth of the American intelligentsia. In a country like Poland you can more or less ignore your private troubles because the environment itself is so drably and inescapably in need. In the States, on the other hand, all that comfort exaggerates the personal unease, making it seem gratuitous, intolerable. To the outsider the well-fed, well-paid, endowed and indulged lives of the American intellectuals make their obsessive "alienation" seem merely a hallucination. Yet, since these are serious men, the concept obviously has some existential reality; it describes sharply enough how they feel towards their environment. It also, as I have suggested, describes a social, almost geographic condition which was there before any fashionable existential theory.

The tradition of traditionlessness lays American artists open to the constant pressure of inner mobility and psychological improvisation, parallel to the constantly shifting, improvised patterns of American society itself. And it is this need continually to play their lives out by ear that makes their work so vital, their influence so central. Nowadays the European intelligentsia turns to the United States in the same way as, for a long period, they once turned to France: not just for the stimulus of an exploding culture—new ideas, new styles, new fashions—but because they sense under all that turmoil and chic the stirrings of a genuinely advanced sensibility. American artists, that is, seem involved in exploring and defining areas of experience which have not previously been expressed in the arts. Which is, perhaps, no more than a high-pitched way of saying that something new and rather marvellous is happening there.

THIS ADVANCE has been pasted over, like some battered old suitcase, with any number of labels. But the most misleading of them was "classicism." Compared with the entranced '90s and tweedy Georgians, T. E. Hulme's theories and T. S. Eliot's practice may have seemed classical enough in their restraint and intelligence. But in every other way the modern arts are simply a fresh extension of the Romantic movement, the original impulse of which had faded away in moods, atmospherics and generalities. Romanticism in its beginnings had been in the party of revolution, progress and independence, an offshoot of radical politics, a revolt against the assured Augustan pieties of good sense, order and the deliberate limitation of feelings and language. In place of that the Romantics put

the single feeling man in all his oddness and spontaneity.

But by the beginning of the first World War, Romantic Man, like Augustan Man, had vanished again into the mists of conventionalised high feeling. The modern movement was an attempt to restore him in the light of new realities. First among these was the science of the inner life. Freud once said that "the poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious. What I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied." From this Lionel Trilling concluded that "psycho-analysis is one of the culminations of the Romanticist literature of the nineteenth century." The hero of modern literature, grandchild of the nineteenth century, is Romantic Man in psycho-analysis.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN classicism and romanticism is one of province, a difference between the inner and outer worlds. But the difference between the romantic and the modern is one of attitude, method and awareness. The modern is committed not simply to feeling but to thinking about feeling; his attitude is tense, analytic, probing, skilful, dissatisfied. He is concerned not simply with his responses but with the sources of those responses; he is concerned with motives, as in some continually unrolling drama of the self, a drama with no plot, an infinity of reasons, and only one character.

The movement of the modern arts has been to press deeper and deeper into the subterranean world of psychic isolation, to live out in the arts the personal extremism of breakdown, paranoia and depression. Lawrence once wrote, "One sheds one's sickness in books—repeats and presents one's emotions to be master of them." This is no longer quite true. The modern artist seems more often to *create* his sickness in his work, giving himself over to it for the sake of the range and intensity of his art. He cultivates not his own garden but his psychosis, or at the very least his psychopathic tendencies.

All this has an odd side effect: the complete internalisation of all phenomena. Where the Romantics made nature the object of their radical aesthetic politics and the freedom to respond—to the nightingale, skylark, daffodils and the rest—seem like a revolutionary principle, the moderns seem utterly unaware of the world outside. They live in and on internal landscapes which they may or may not project on to the outer world as seems convenient. As geographers of the underworld and historians of the inner migrations they are always meticulous and preoccupied, often passionate, imaginative, even brave. They have endowed that tangled, badly-lit country with a separate and curiously

objective life of its own. But in the poetry of, say, Robert Lowell or Sylvia Plath this extraordinary self-awareness is delicately counter-balanced by an utter indifference; the outer world only seems to exist in as much as it can be assimilated. Even an Englishman like Ted Hughes, who starts out as a nature poet and whose work contains more animals than the London Zoo, lavishes all that loving, sharp detail on his menagerie only for whatever corresponding sense of unpredictable violence he finds in himself. He writes like a nature poet gone blind; and he is typical.

THE REASON FOR ALL THIS is one of the great clichés of our time: the artist is thrown increasingly “in on himself” by the sheer size and engulfing blankness of “industrial society”; as life becomes more mass-produced, mass-organised and statistical the arts become proportionately, despairingly, more extreme and solipsistic. To this is added the second great cliché: the “crisis” situation—the inheritance of the concentration camps and the threat of a nuclear holocaust—is reflected in the personal extremism of the artists, as though, like diplomats, they had to tread with ever-increasing wariness in the knowledge of total disaster—a knowledge which they have obtained by an endless series of underground tests on themselves. No doubt all this is true. But the fact that it is the Americans rather than the Europeans or Russians who have responded to this situation with such artistic alacrity is due, I think, to their peculiar genius for loneliness, which creates these conditions even despite the environment.

THE MARXISTS invoke extremism and “negative” art as evidence of the decline of capitalist society. But the opposite is equally true: because society as a whole is so flourishing, powerful, and rich, the artists, in their role of outsiders, feel that they must pay the price of the collective success. It is as though they regarded society’s existential failings not just as their responsibility but as their own personal guilt. If their anxiety is unprecedented in its ubiquity and intensity, that is because they are unable to find scapegoats for it outside their own selves. Hence their positive obligation to make the worst of a good thing. The fact that, like most other citizens, they are well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed, well-paid, increases their inner sense of trouble. Even to live in a political system that works becomes frustrating: you can vote, help change the party in power and yet not make a jot of difference to the benevolent anonymity of society itself, which goes on proliferating like a cancer at the expense of the live cells. So even the liberal-humanist position—part of that powerful Jewish influence on American life—

seems to be undergoing some crisis of nerves. Each new issue—particularly each promising one—is so swiftly, sophisticatedly and sceptically criticised that there is never even a momentary resting-place for optimism. Of course, the destruction is brilliant, witty, stimulating, tart; but it is so only for the sake of brilliance, wit, stimulation, tartness. Attack for the sake of attack is an automatic response, another product perhaps of the isolation and restless drive. So in a curious way, intellectual energy becomes a means of promoting hopelessness.

LIBERAL HUMANISM was, I suppose, a hand-down from the ‘thirties, and an attempt to carry over into cultural affairs enlightened left-wing principles in a non-political form. As such, it suffered the same fate as Adlai Stevenson (and did so, perhaps, because of Stevenson’s fate): defeat, decline, and then official establishment in a grandiose but essentially unimportant position in the hierarchy of power. Just as Kennedy, compared with Stevenson, represented a political attitude which was at once more stirring, tough-minded, adroit, and less tenderly principled, so too in the arts: the attitude is now more ruthless, nihilistic, and egocentric than anything foreseen by the liberal tradition. Lionel Trilling may have hit on the difference in the titles of his books; *The Liberal Imagination* gave way to *The Opposing Self*.

But when artists begin to internalise everything—nature and society, art and life, intimacy and response—they have to face a simple but overbearing difficulty: beyond a certain point, the self is also boring. Which is perhaps only another way of saying that the self contains a great deal of destructiveness which it turns as equally against itself as against the outer world. The result is a bored moral nihilism which makes artists of all kinds expend immense intellectual and creative energy on the effort to cut away the ground from under their own feet. Extremism in the arts—the cultivation of breakdown and all the diverse facts of schizophrenia—ends not so much in anarchy as in a kind of internal fascism in which the artist, to relieve his own boredom, becomes both torturer and tortured. This may in no way affect his political enlightenment or general liberal stance. It is simply a question of his attitude to himself and his work: ruthless, destructive, deeply self-involved, wildly self-gratifying. Even the cult of the Absurd, for example, is simply a charming and objective way of re-phrasing this internal nihilism: you acknowledge the sureness with which universal darkness buries all, the inevitability of the descent into blank chaos, and then you make a joke about it all—which is in itself the final nihilism, since it destroys even the force of your understanding of destruc-

tion. Lord Snow picked the wrong example when he ticked off the arts men for not understanding the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The whole of modern art centres on it: it is concerned, that is, with the principle of psychic entropy, by which the artist's whole world tends continually to run down towards disorder and disintegration. Thus a work of art, like a law of physics, becomes an attempt to halt the dissolution by a clear, ordered, but temporary system of insights. Uncertainty has always been a stimulus: now it is also an artistic principle.

IN THE CONTEXT OF general American *bon-homie*, togetherness, and wealthy self-satisfaction, the intense anxiety of the artist is healthy and necessary. But the immediate context in which art is made is that of the creator himself, and maybe a few friends. And there the nihilism is much harder to handle, the isolation harder to accept. Perhaps the continually dissatisfied creative drive towards new forms, new systems, new insights is simply an attempt to find some means of making tolerable those two opposing pressures: the mass pressure of the collective unity of material power, and the lonely pressure of energy turned in and pressing down in utter isolation. *A. Alvarez*

Letter from Vienna

The End of Socialist Realism?

"IT WAS Pasternak himself who told me this. One night during the purges, his phone rang. It was Stalin. 'Boris Leonidovich, do you know a poet called Mandelstam?' he asked. 'Of course I know him!' Pasternak replied. 'Any good?'—'One of the very best!'—'Pity!' said Stalin, as he put down the receiver...."

The speaker was one of Eastern Europe's most prominent theatre men. The place—Vienna, at the end of last March. The Austrian Society for Literature, always conscious of its Austrian duty to act as a "European bridge" between East and West, had invited twenty-five European directors, critics, and playwrights to discuss the contemporary theatre East and West of what is still called the Iron Curtain. I confess that I had accepted the invitation more because of a nostalgia for whipped cream and authentic goulash than because I had expected any fruitful results from yet another public discussion. The experience of the Drama Conference at Edinburgh had been dispiriting. It had been very difficult to get even within a mile of a discussion with the Eastern bloc representatives

then: they had immediately entrenched themselves behind a smokescreen of sentimental clichés about "the sacredness of art" and "the artist's duty to serve humanity." Why should there be a basis for more useful dialogue less than two years later?

Well, I must admit that I was wrong. The meeting with a selection of prominent theatre people from Poland (Erwin Axer, director of the Contemporary Theatre; Jan Kott, the scholar and Shakespeare critic; Adam Tarn, editor of *Dialog*, Europe's best drama magazine; and Slavomir Mrozek, the playwright), Czechoslovakia (O. Krejca and Jan Grossman, two of Europe's most daring experimental directors), Hungary (Gyula Hay, the playwright), Bulgaria (Grisha Ostrovsky, director of the Theatre of Satire), and Rumania (Liviu Ciulei, director and stage designer) was not only exhilarating on a purely personal level, but also a revelation about the changing state of affairs in Eastern Europe to-day.

There was only one disappointment: the two Russian representatives, who had accepted the Austrian invitation and had announced their imminent arrival, simply did not turn up. Friends who had been in touch with them only days before their scheduled departure could not understand the reason why Nikolai Okhlopkov, the director, and Georgi Tovstonogov, the leader of the Leningrad theatre, should not have come; they had talked of the trip with eager anticipation. No explanation was forthcoming from the Russian Embassy in Vienna which had been actively concerned in the arrangements.

Apart from this slight blot on the programme, however, the main impression was one of almost complete harmony between Eastern and Western representatives. If anything, the Eastern contingent seemed *more avant-garde*, *more radical* in its artistic liberalism, *more "with it"* than the West Europeans—and as well (if not better) informed on all the latest trends and fashions here and there. And they talked quite freely, without inhibitions of any kind—both in private and in public.

The organisers of the conference had prepared a number of questions, clearly designed to start off the usual debates—questions about the theatre's ability to "change the world," about the role of "realism," about the conflict between the Epic Theatre and the Absurd. Yet no familiar East-West discussion developed. The Eastern representatives steadfastly declined to defend the political function of the theatre, the value of socialist realism, or to oppose the introspective pessimistic work of playwrights like Beckett and Ionesco. Quite the contrary: the Rumanian representative, for example, made a spirited bid to claim Ionesco as a great Rumanian national asset! The Czech director,