

ARTHUR KOESTLER

# THE YOGI AND THE COMMISSAR

## I. THE STATIC SPECTRUM

I LIKE to imagine an instrument which would enable us to break up patterns of social behaviour as the physicist is able to break up a beam of rays. Looking through this sociological spectroscope we would see spread out under the diffraction-grate the rainbow-coloured spectrum of all possible human attitudes to life. The whole distressing muddle would become neat, clear and comprehensive.

On one end of the spectrum, obviously on the infra-red end, we would see the Commissar. The Commissar believes in Change from Without. He believes that all the pests of humanity, including constipation and the Oedipus complex, can and will be cured by Revolution, that is by a radical reorganization of the system of production and distribution of goods; that this end justifies the use of all means, including violence, ruse, treachery and poison; that logical reasoning is an unfailing compass and the Universe a kind of very large clockwork in which a very large number of electrons once set into motion will forever revolve in their predictable orbits; and that whosoever believes in anything else is an escapist. This end of the spectrum has the lowest frequency of vibrations and is, in a way, the coarsest component of the beam; but it conveys the maximum amount of heat.

On the other end of the spectrum, where the waves become so short and high-frequent that the eye no longer sees them, colourless, warmthless but all-penetrating, crouches the yogi, melting away in the ultra-violet. He has no objection to calling the universe a clockwork, but he thinks that it could be called, with about the same amount of truth, a musical-box or a fishpond. He believes that the End is unpredictable and that the Means alone count. He rejects violence under any circumstances. He believes that logical reasoning loses its compass value in the

same degree as the mind approaches the magnetic pole of Truth or the Absolute, which alone matters. He believes that nothing can be improved by exterior organization and everything by the individual effort from within; and that whosoever believes in anything else is an escapist. He believes that the debt-servitude imposed upon the peasants of India by the moneylenders should not be abolished by financial legislation but by spiritual means. He believes that each individual is alone but attached to the all-one by an invisible umbilical cord; that his creative forces, his goodness, trueness and usefulness can alone be nourished by the saps which reach him through this cord; and that his only task during his earthly life is to avoid any action, emotion or thought which might lead to a breaking of the cord. This avoidance has to be maintained by a difficult, elaborate technique, the only kind of technique which he accepts.

Between these two extremes are spread out in a continuous sequence the spectral lines of the more sedate human attitudes. The more we approach its centre, the more the spectrum becomes blurred and woolly. On the other hand, this increase of wool on the naked spectral bodies makes them look more decent and intercourse with them more civilized. You cannot argue with a naked Commissar—he starts at once beating his chest and next he strangles you, whether you be friend or foe, in his deadly embrace. You cannot argue with the ultraviolet skeleton either, because words mean nothing to him. You can argue with post-war-planners, Fabianists, Quakers, Liberals and Philanthropists. But the argument will lead nowhere, for the real issue remains between the Yogi and the Commissar, between the fundamental conceptions of Change from Without and Change from Within.

It is easy to say that all that is wanted is a synthesis—the synthesis between saint and revolutionary; but so far this has never been achieved. What has been achieved are various motley forms of compromise—the blurred intermediary bands of the spectrum—compromise but not synthesis. Apparently the two elements do not mix, and this may be one of the reasons why we have made such a mess of our History.

The reason why a synthesis has so far not been achieved can be given in various terms. What appears as a conflict of principles is very often only a conflict in emphasis, but this does not make the reconciliation easier. The Commissar's emotional energies are

fixed on the relation between individual and society, the Yogi's on the relation between the individual and the universe. Again it is easy to say that all that is wanted is a little mutual effort. One might as well ask a homosexual to make a little effort towards the opposite sex, and vice versa.

But even if the balance of emphasis may be adjusted and a working compromise achieved, the contradiction in *method* remains. Every attempt to achieve an inner change of man by changing the exterior order has so far failed, from Spartacus' Sun State through Inquisition and Reformation to Soviet Russia. This failure seems to be rooted in two disturbing phenomena which Kant could have called the Antinomies of Applied Reasoning. The first is the Antinomy of the Serpentine; the second the Antinomy of the Slopes.

The peak of Utopia is steep; the serpentine-road which leads up to it has many tortuous curves. While you are moving up the road you never face the peak, your direction is the tangent, leading nowhere. If a great mass of people is pushing forward along the serpentine they will, according to the fatal laws of inertia, push off their leader from the road and then follow him, the whole movement flying off at the tangent into the nowhere. That is what happened to most revolutionary movements, where the mass-impulse is strong and the inertia of the mass is converted into a violent centrifugal force. In the more cautious reformist movements, on the other hand, the momentum soon fades out and the ascending spiral first becomes a wiry circling round and round the peak without gaining in height until it finally degenerates into a descending spiral; e.g. the Trade Unionist movement.

The prophets of Change from Within who try to use the vehicle of organized ascent are caught by the antinomy of the serpentine and share the vehicle's fate: either they fly off the road with it—Inquisition; or slide gradually down with it—State Churches in the Liberal era.

The second root of failure is the Antinomy of the Slopes, or of Ends and Means. Either the Means are subordinated to the End, or vice versa. Theoretically you may build up elaborate dialectical, liberal, conventional or religious half-way houses; but if burdened with responsibility, and confronted with a practical decision to take, you have to choose one way or the other. Once you have chosen you are on the slope. If you have chosen to subordinate

the Means to the End, the slope makes you slide down deeper and deeper on a moving carpet of common-sense propositions, for instance: The right of self-defence—the best defence is attack—increase of ruthlessness shortens the struggle, etc. Another well-known slope-pattern starts with the 'Healer's Knife' and ends with the Moscow Purges. The fatal mechanism of this slope was already known to Pascal: 'Man is neither angel nor brute and his misery is that he who would act the angel acts the brute.'

The alternative method has, to our knowledge, only once been tried on a large scale, by Ghandi. His slope started with Satyagraha and gradually made him slide down to his present position of non-violence towards the Japanese aggression: the Japanese might kill a few million Indians but some day they would get tired of it and thus the moral integrity of India would be saved.

Obviously the prospects for the masses of common people are not brighter under this inverted Machiavellianism than under the leadership of the Commissars. One slope leads to the Inquisition and the Purges; the other to passive submission to bayoneting and raping; to villages without sewage, septic childbeds and trachoma. The Yogi and the Commissar may call it quits.

## II. THE SPECTRUM IN MOTION

But they don't. Unable to form a synthesis and unsatisfied by the patched-up compromises in the medium bands of the spectrum, they attract and repel each other in rhythmical intervals. This strange minuet is one of the more exciting aspects of History which Marxism, otherwise the most serviceable guide, falls short of explaining.

Under certain historic climates mass-migrations start from one end of the spectrum to the other, general displacements from infra-red to ultra-violet or vice versa, like mighty trade-winds travelling over the seas. The nineteenth century brought such a general displacement towards the Commissar or infra-red end. The present climate favours the opposite direction. Since the early 'thirties we are all travelling, more or less consciously, more or less willingly, towards the ultra-violet end.

The less consciously we drift with the wind the more willingly we do it; the more consciously the less willingly. Personally I belong to the latter type; I wish one could still write an honest infra-red novel without an ultra-violet ending. But one can't,

just as no honest scientist can now publish a book on physics without a metaphysical epilogue, no honest Socialist can write a survey of the Left's defeats without accounting for the irrational factor in mass-psychology. He who clings blindly to the past will be left behind; but he who abandons himself too readily will be carried away like a dry leaf; all one can do is to travel even more consciously and even less willingly.

But again, is such intentional readaptation possible? Are those who survive the great spectral displacements the fittest or merely the glibbest? Thinking of some fellow-writers who achieved the journey from the pink decade to the yogi decade with such monkey-like agility one is tempted to say: Let the dead bury their dead. They answer: But we mean it—and there is no doubt that, at least, they believe that they mean it. Yet what writer has ever written a line without at least meaning to mean it? Hence one first feels disgust with them; then one finds out that one was disgusted for the wrong reasons; and after that one is still disgusted because they were so quick to find the right reasons for their expatriation from the infra-red to the ultra-violet. In these matters clumsiness is respectable and glibness abject. They never seriously attempted to sail against the wind; they abandoned themselves to its first breeze, which broke them gently from their stems, and whirled them round and dropped them gently at the other end; that is perhaps why, when you hear their whisper, it sounds so much like the rattling of dead leaves.

For the political Commissars the spectral displacement has more tragic results than for the arty Commissars. I don't mean that they necessarily feel deeper about it; perhaps it is rather the other way round. In ages of distress when values crumble and survival has an ever so slight but still perceptible touch of glibness and betrayal, artists are often tempted by suicide but rarely commit it, whereas the revolutionary is rarely tempted by suicide, but when it happens he has usually no other choice. In a sense spiritual life can be defined as the training for the acceptance of death; the Commissar is the human type least advanced in this training and yet by force of circumstances most advanced towards its aim. This is the core of the Commissar's tragedy.

Thus the artist shows the least resistance against being carried away; the revolutionary the greatest. Perhaps because the artist *qua* artist has to leave the tap open for those underground

currents which, in times of displacements, inundate the whole vessel and sweep it away, whereas the revolutionary *qua* revolutionary has to keep the tap tightly closed. Indeed the Commissar can be defined as the human type which has completely severed relations to the subconscious. This is the more remarkable as the constant danger under which he lives—I think Lenin used the phrase ‘we are dead men on furlough’—is a constant temptation to communicate with those forbidden zones. In fact he is condemned to live in a permanent state of repressed puberty. While in a normal curriculum the great crisis of adolescence, the confrontation with the tragic and insoluble problems of existence only occurs once—a limited process like teething—the revolutionary spends all his life in this tropical climate and those tragic problems remain his daily bread and butter. The ordinary citizen, once the transcendental teething is over, evolves a smooth *modus vivendi* towards the absolute; the best the Commissar can hope is to find a smooth *modus moriendi*.

Yet though living in a climate of perpetuated adolescence, his behaviour is as unadolescent, unecstatic and unromantic as can be imagined. One has the feeling that his subconscious has been dealt with not on the analyst’s sofa but on the surgeon’s table with the amputating knife. In fact one of his often recurring problems is not to give himself away by sleep-talking or other subconscious automatisms; and if he is a good Commissar he succeeds. He is a marvel of unneurotic repression: one of the most admirable achievements of the human species.

Now if life becomes impossible without pity, it is perhaps equally impossible without a grain of self-pity. The Commissar is not immune against suffering, but what he experiences is more the echo of pain than pain itself, like the aching of an amputated limb. He compels admiration, but also pity, that tender pity which the weak sometimes feel for the strong. Faced with giant figures like Blanqui, Luxemburg, Vera Figner, we can do nothing but shut up and realize what futile, frivolous dwarfs we are; yet pity remains.

That this instinct is justified becomes apparent when the Commissar faces the crisis of his life. This is a tragic and complicated process, often misunderstood. The forms it may take vary individually, but basically it is always the same: it is the revenge of the amputated organ. In a story of Gerard de Nerval’s,

which I remember only vaguely, a judge sentences a thief to have his hand cut off; the amputated hand then pursues the judge and finally strangles him. In the Commissar's case judge and victim are one person and the cut-off organ is not a hand; it is, if we examine it closer, the Yogi's umbilical cord, his means of communication with the Absolute, with the 'Oceanic Feeling' to use Freud's sober term. The Commissar lived in the conviction that it was a luxury-organ, but when the crisis comes he realizes that it is not. *The Man-Society connection suddenly proves to be not enough to procure psychic metabolism; the Man-Universe connection has to be re-established.*

At this point one of two things might happen. Either the cut connection is re-established, and as an act of atonement the Man-Society connection broken off; this is the classical case of the Revolutionary turning into a Mystic, the total jump from Commissar to Yogi. Or the connection is *not* re-established—then the dead cord coils up and strangles its owner. This is the equally classical case of the ex-revolutionaries whose souls died of suffocation. They might appear as cadaverous as Sinowjew at the Moscow trials; or satanic and cynical like Laval and Doriot; or as impotent and desiccated as the Left party-bureaucracy. Since Rosa Luxembourg there has arisen no man or woman endowed with both the Oceanic feeling and the momentum of action.

Unfortunately we have as yet no scientific terminology to describe these processes, which are of vital importance for the understanding of the 'subjective factor' in History. Hence the more soberly one tries to describe them the more vague imagery one has, *faute de mieux*, to use. The enormous literature of the three main contemporary schools in psychology contains not a single case-history of this non-hysterical conversion, the revolutionary's transformation into a cynic or mystic, whereas history, past and present, abounds in examples. Jung comes nearest to the question: his interpretation of the subconscious bears most resemblance to the 'umbilical cord', but he prefers to study its effects on the most unsuitable human type, the wealthy middle-aged Babbitts. And this for good reason: were he to choose his patients among the type which inhabits the German or Russian concentration camps, not only would his therapy prove to be inadequate but he would have to introduce so many new determining factors into his system that both his terminology and his



Weltanschauung would go to blazes. The Commissar's spectral displacements are *terra nova* for the psychologist.

Turning to the more muddled, intermediary bands of the spectrum we find that their reactions to the mystic current are of a very revealing nature. In the pink regions the reaction first manifests itself by an intense consciousness of the Left's serial defeats, of disgust with the old parties, disgust with their worn-out leaders, with plans and promises, ideas and ideals and most of all with one's own foolish and frustrated hopes. This pink hangover is the emotional starting point. Next comes the realization that 'there must have been something basically wrong in our approach to the Masses'. Next to this the discovery that on the very point where they failed—activation of the masses—Fascism was horribly successful. Now the feelings which success inspires in the unsuccessful is envy. If we look at things closely we find indeed that the pink attitude to Fascism is envy rather than hatred.

What we envy we try to imitate. The fascination of Fascism was obviously its emotional, irrational, mystic type of appeal—the ultra-violet component of Fascism. Here the development ends for the moment. It has not gone further yet; but it has gone as far as this. Which proves that in certain constellations the displacement towards the ultra-violet has very dangerous aspects. Those who underestimate this danger—the dangers of the pink hangover—have not realized yet that just as a crowd or mass is more than the sum total of the individuals which compose it, in the same way the constellation 'Left' is more than the sum total of the Left parties, an entity of a higher order with its own laws of movement.

There is one definite profiteer of the spectral displacement: the Scientist. In a certain sense it was he who started the movement; then its momentum carried him further than he probably liked. One should remember that the irrational or ultra-violet element which so strongly taints present-day physics, biology, psychology, was not a philosophical fashion smuggled into the laboratories, but grew out of the laboratories themselves and created the new philosophical climate. The most striking example is the development of physics which was an enormously successful rational Commissar-science up to the closing years of the last century



and has become since more and more of a yogi-science. Matter, substance, time, space, causality, precision of measurement and the belief in the predictability of behaviour of the Measured, have run like sand through the physicist's fingers until nothing remained but a group of formal statements of this type: 'If a small poker-dice is so constructed that we have no reason to assume a preference on its part for falling on the ace-side, then we are entitled to expect that, in the course of a great number of casts, it will show no preference for falling on the ace-side.'

This is undeniably a very precise statement, but one must admit that it is a rather modest one in relation to our hunger for having the mysteries of the Universe explained to us. The modern physicist of course denies that his task should be to 'explain' anything, and he takes a masochistic delight in producing formulæ which establish with precision the degree of unprecision in his statements, i.e. the inadequacy of physics not only to explain, but even to describe what exactly is going on in the physical world. Some time ago Laplace thought that if a superior intelligence counted all atoms and their velocities at a given moment he could predict all future events to the end of the world, including the brand of Mr. Churchill's cigars. Physicists and Philosophers of the last Commissar period tried to jolly around the fatalistic trap of physical determinism, but there was no escape from it. In nineteenth-century physics the world was running down like clockwork without any freedom, except the arbitrariness of the initial state and of the initial choice of a certain set of 'Natural Laws' which governed the mechanism. In twentieth-century physics this initial arbitrariness or freedom is evenly distributed in minute quantities over all possible cross-sections in time and space; the initial creation has become a *creatio continua*. 'Freedom' or 'arbitrariness' are of course merely terms to indicate the presence of factors which cannot be described or accounted for in the physicist's terminology. Nineteenth-century physics describes a sharply defined world with a blurred initial stage; contemporary physics describes an evenly blurred world, like a film with coarse granulation. (The granulation being indicated by the Quantum of Action 'h' and defined in Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle.) To describe this world as 'Pantheistic', 'Free', 'Undetermined', 'Statistical', 'Spiritual' or 'Voluntaristic' is more or less a matter of taste.

What really matters is that the physicist's instruments of measurement indicate the presence of physically unmeasurable factors. And this is the reason why the physicist travels perhaps more consciously than anybody else towards the ultra-violet.<sup>1</sup>

### III. THE PENDULUM

The Commissar, the Artist, the vague Man of Goodwill, the Scientist, not only seem to react in different ways to the great spectral displacement, but their motives for participating in it seem also different in nature. Is there a common reason for this pilgrimage? To a certain extent the revolution in physics has certainly affected the artist, the revolution in psychology has influenced political outlook, and similar cross-influences are easy to discover. They form a pattern of diagonal lines of forces, but this pattern is that of a network, not of a causal chain. There is no causal chain running from Quantum Mechanics to the self-accusations of Bucharin, but in an indirect way they are all linked together by diagonals. We cannot ask for a common reason, we can only ask for a common denominator in the variety of reasons.

In the critical years of the Weimar Republic, when a Communist or Fascist Revolution seemed equally possible and the only impossibility the continuation of the worn-out régime, a certain

<sup>1</sup>I am talking of the Scientist, not of the Charlatan. If Commissar-journalese of the C.P. textbook type is bad, Yogi-journalese of the Gerald Heard type is worse. Both discredit the idea they stand for, but while in the first case the defendant may plead that according to his convictions efficient propaganda always includes a certain amount of charlatanism, in the second case this defence cannot be made. Here are a few examples of yogi-journalese:

'Elisha also acts as a telepathic secret-service agent for the king of Israel' (Gerald Heard, *Pain, Sex and Time*, p. 129). 'Moses we know was married. He could not, therefore, have used complete sex sublimation as a technique for enlarging consciousness.' (*Ibid.*, p. 123.) 'Though, therefore, Vajiroli may seem to offer a secondary path to those who say they cannot sublimate, if "Right Contemplation", Samadhi (the words are the same in Pali) non-personal consciousness (ecstasis: *enotria*) is not only possible but the actual getting into the next evolutionary stage of consciousness, then surely we must aim at nothing else, and the problem of sex, by this and by this only, finds at last its solution.' (*Ibid.*, p. 229. It is noteworthy that Heard does not explain who or what 'Vajiroli' is; mentions 'Samadhi' only once, on page 214; and Pali not at all; nor does he explain why he prints the Greek for 'ecstasis' in the original.) So much for the form; an analysis of the contents would require more space but lead to equally discouraging results.

Ernst Juenger coined the phrase of the "anti-capitalistic nostalgia of the masses". This vague but violent longing was indeed shared by groups of people of otherwise very different tendencies. Perhaps the common denominator we are looking for can best be described as an 'anti-materialistic nostalgia'. It is idiosyncratic against the rationalism, the shallow optimism, the ruthless logic, the arrogant self-assurance, the Promethean attitude of the nineteenth century; it is attracted by mysticism, romanticism, the irrational ethical values, by mediæval twilight. In short it is moving towards the very things from which the last-but-one great spectral displacement towards the infra-red has moved away. Apparently these movements have a pendular rhythm.

The swinging of this pendulum from rationalistic to romantic periods and back is not contradictory to the conception of a basic dialectic movement of History. They are like the tidal waves on a river which yet flows into the sea. One of the fatal lacunæ in the Marxist interpretation of history is that it was only concerned with the course of the river, not with the waves. The mass-psychological aspect of Nazism is not describable in Marxist terms, in terms of the river's course; we need the tidal waves to account for it. On the other hand our pendulum alone is no guide to history. We must know about the river before we talk of the waves.

Perhaps it is not too hazardous to assume that these pendular changes in the mass-psychological spectrum are a process analogous to the rhythmical change of waking and sleep in the individual. The irrational or romantic periods of mass-psychology are periods of sleep and dream. The dreams are not necessarily peaceful; more often they are nightmares; but without these periodic plunges into the subconscious the vital saps would not be provided for the next wideawake Promethean or Commissar period. Perhaps every Gothic period is followed by a Renaissance period and they are but the succession of yoga-nights and commissar-days in the curriculum of the race. And perhaps this, our present civilization, is not dying, only sleepy.

PETER QUENNEL

## ANDRÉ GIDE

CIRCUMSPECT in gesture and grave in utterance, with coat-collar mysteriously turned up and thick eyebrows pulled down towards restlessly observant eyes, M. André Gide is apt to make on the casual votary (who has been escorted by an acquaintance to the great man's table) an impression that is both puzzling and disconcerting. Baudelaire is said to have resembled a *mauvais prêtre*: M. Gide suggests a spoiled priest with something of the schoolmaster. Like a priest's or a pedagogue's, his phrases are carefully chosen. When he speaks in English—which he does deliberately, correctly and unidiomatically—he produces the effect of wishing to convey more than he is ever prepared to state or of attributing perhaps rather too great a degree of acuteness to his admirer's intuition. As I re-read his private journals, his novels and his *soties*, the impression made by M. Gide's personality—almost ten years ago now—is continually coming back. If there is a single theme that runs through his books—or rather if there is a single mood that seems to colour them all—the clue is provided by the word: '*inquiétude*'. Luckily for himself as a literary artist, unluckily no doubt for his contentment as an individual, M. Gide has never been at peace with the world, at ease among accepted beliefs or on particularly good terms with his own exacting conscience. But far from attempting to conceal, or to rationalize, this state of affairs, he has courageously accepted it: he appears to feel that it is a necessary condition of his existence as a writer and to value the special quality that it lends to his style and thought. '*J'ai cultivé mon hystérie avec jouissance et terreur*', records Baudelaire in one of his autobiographical notebooks. So M. Gide has evidently cultivated his peculiar *malaise* and attempted to squeeze out the quintessence of his moral restlessness. A mood, born in the problems of the individual human being, has been re-born in a less impermanent shape on the plane of literature.

M. Gide makes no mystery of the problem's origin. The family from which he descends was Puritanical, Protestant and highly well-intentioned. On to this upright and rugged stock