

The Writer and Communism

By George Steiner

ONE OF THE STRIKING differences between fascism and communism is this: fascism has inspired no great work of art. With the possible exception of Montherlant, it has drawn into its orbit no writer of the first rank. (Ezra Pound was no fascist; he used the occasions and trappings of fascism for his own quirky economics.) Communism, on the contrary, has been a central force in much of the finest of modern literature; and personal encounter with communism has marked the sensibility and career of many of the major writers of the age.

Why this difference? No doubt, fascism is too vile and scurrilous an ideology to produce those charities of the imagination which are essential to literate art. Communism, even where it has gone venomous, is a mythology of the human future, a vision of human possibility rich in moral demand. Fascism is the ultimate code of the hoodlum; communism fails because it would seek to impose upon the fragile plurality of human nature and conduct an artificial ideal of self-denial and historic purpose. Fascism tyrannizes through contempt of man; communism tyrannizes by exalting man above that sphere of private error, private ambition, and private love which we call freedom.

There is also a more specific difference. Hitler and Goebbels were madly cunning manipulators of language; but they had scant respect for the life of the mind. Communism, by contrast, is a creed penetrated from the very moment of its historical origin by a sense of the values of intellect and art. In Marx and Engels this sense is explicit. They were intellectuals to the core. Lenin paid to art the supreme tribute of fear; he shied away from it, acknowledging the obscure, entrancing powers of plastic and musical form over the rational intellect.

Mr. Steiner is a young American literary critic whose background is as varied as it is distinguished. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University, for several years on the editorial staff of The Economist (London), and a member of the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study. As of October next, he will be a Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge. His two books are: Tolstoy or Dostoevsky (Knopf, Vintage Books, 1961) and The Death of Tragedy (Knopf, 1961).

Trotsky was a *littérateur* in the most flamboyant sense of the word. Even under Stalin, the writer and the literary work played a vital role in Communist strategy. Writers were persecuted and killed precisely because literature was recognized as an important and potentially dangerous force. This is a crucial point. Literature was being honored, in however cruel or perverted a way, by the very fact of Stalin's distrust. And when the partial thaw came, the position of the writer in Soviet society grew once again complex and problematic. One cannot conceive of a fascist state being shaken by a mere book; but *Doctor Zhivago* was one of the major crises in the recent life of Communist Russia.

Whether by instinct or meditation, writers have always been aware of their special position in Communist ideology. They have taken communism seriously because *it* has taken them seriously. Thus a history of the relations between communism and modern literature is, in certain vital respects, a history of both.

MR. JÜRGEN RÜHLE is one of the host of writers and intellectuals who have experienced the spell of communism and then broken with Stalinist reality. Since taking refuge in Western Germany, he has established himself as an expert historian and observer of Communist literary and theatrical life. In his new book, *Literatur und Revolution*,* he has set out to write a history of "the writer and communism" throughout the world in the period from 1917 to 1960. It is a massive, wide-reaching enterprise: it spans the course of Russian literature from Blok to *Zhivago*; it deals with the poetry of Pablo Neruda and the fiction of Erskine Caldwell; it passes from a discussion of the politics of Thomas Mann to a critique of Lu Hsun. Furnished with a chronological table and bibliography, *Literatur und Revolution* is both a critical essay and a work of reference. And a mere glance at the index and illustrations shows that there is hardly a major writer in our time (Proust, Joyce and Faulkner are no-

* *Literatur und Revolution*, by Jürgen Rühle, Kiepenheuer & Wietsch, Köln and Berlin, 1960.

table exceptions) who has not been touched at some stage in his life and art by communism.

The first section of the book deals with the destiny of Russian literature under Lenin, Zhdanov and Khrushchev. It covers familiar but momentous ground. We observe once again the genius and bitter end of the revolutionary triad: Blok, Yessenin, Mayakovsky. Rühle is particularly interesting on the subject of that unwieldy, much neglected novel of Gorky, *Klim Samgin*. He argues persuasively that Gorky was unable to finish the work because he already discerned that conflict between individual life and Communist organization which was to drive so many Soviet writers into silence or death. Rühle goes on to discuss the chroniclers of the civil war, Isaac Babel and Sholokhov. Here again, his reading is acute: he shows that Sholokhov has always been a regionalist of an archaic anti-intellectual stamp, who has succeeded in being at the same time the voice of nationalist and Stalinist sentiment. He gives a plausible account of the Byzantine evasions and audacities that have kept Ehrenburg alive through winter and thaw. And beneath the crowded narrative of individual careers and works sounds the relentless motif of banishment, execution or suicide.

Finally, Rühle comes to Pasternak. He sees in Pasternak the true voice of Russia, the vision that will prevail beyond the tyrannies of the moment. He agrees with Edmund Wilson in discerning in Lara and Zhivago an unanswerable challenge to the historicism and life-denying determinism of the Communist ideology. The bare fact that Pasternak could conceive of their private rebellious love while remaining inside the Soviet Union proves that the Russian spirit is alive beneath the ice-crust of party discipline. Pasternak was among the first to read the farewell poem which Yessenin wrote with his own blood. He knew the famous suicide note of Mayakovsky. But by a miracle of courage and discretion he survived. And in *Doctor Zhivago* he drew up that indictment against Soviet inhumanity which his fellow-poets had hinted at in the tragic manner of their deaths.

There is much truth in this, and Rühle expresses it well. But not having been in the Soviet Union recently, he fails to realize how remote the world of Lara and Zhivago is from the imaginings and feelings of the present younger generation. It is the rulers, the old men, who are afraid of the book and who have sought to silence it. I wonder whether the young would see in *Doctor Zhivago* anything but a deeply moving fairy tale, or a piece of historical fiction as distant as *Anna Karenina*.

THE SECOND PART of *Literatur und Revolution* is by far the most valuable. It deals authoritatively with the tangled relations between communism and German lit-

erature. It is no exaggeration to say that there is scarcely a single German writer of note since 1919 who has not taken a declared stance, either positive or antagonistic, toward communism. There is some deep affinity between the historicism and systematic idealism of the Marxist ideology and the German spirit from which it sprang. Often, as Rühle shows, extreme right and extreme left meet in Germany on a common ground of totalitarian bias. The Hitler-Stalin pact, however deceitful and short-lived, was like an allegory of a genuine relationship.

Rühle excels in his account of Johannes Becher, the Orpheus of Stalinism, and of Egon Erwin Kisch, the most brilliant journalist ever to serve the Marxist cause. He offers a sensitive reading of the works of Anna Seghers, showing how her recent novels betray the contortions of a genuine artist trying to come to terms with the gray half-truths of "socialist realism." He illuminates the role of Marxist ideas in the historical fiction of Heinrich Mann and Leon Feuchtwanger. He suggests, in a carefully documented chapter, that the disagreements between Heinrich and Thomas Mann stand for a larger dialectic: the confrontation of the German mind with the opposite but related seductions of right-wing nationalism on the one hand and radical internationalism on the other.

As in the section dealing with Soviet literature, there runs beneath the narrative of individual lives the constant theme of blood. One after another, the voices of German poetry and drama and criticism were stifled by exile, murder or suicide. Reading this calendar of death—Ossietszky, Mühsam, Kornfeld, Theodor Wolff, Friedell, Toller, Hasenclever, Ernst Weiss, Stefan Zweig—one realizes that literature is indeed the most dangerous of trades.

After this masterful treatment of German letters, *Literatur und Revolution* goes on to survey the rest of the literate world. The pace becomes somewhat dizzying. In only thirty pages, Rühle discusses the manifold impact of communism on Camus, Sartre, Gide, Malraux, Eluard, Céline and Aragon. A further twenty pages wrap up the Italian writers—Silone, Pavese, Malaparte, Moravia, Carlo Levi. Less than forty pages are taken up by the complex flirtations with Marxism and Communist dreams of such American writers as Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Steinbeck, Hemingway and James T. Farrell. Brief chapters whirl the reader across Latin America and Asia. Inevitably, this latter half of the book tends to become a register of names, dates and titles—useful for quick reference, but inadequate to the variousness and complexity of the subject.

In the two closing chapters, Rühle deals with the principal apostates and rebels within the camp of Marx-

ist literature. He discusses Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, Orwell's *1984*, and the rueful memoirs of Gide and Spender. Finally, he records the rebellion against Stalinism of the young Polish and Hungarian writers of 1956. During the subsequent period of repression in Hungary, Tibor Dery was condemned for having led "an organization hostile to the state." A grim joke was made of this in Budapest: what might that organization have been? Answer: the Hungarian people. And as his compendious survey closes, Rühle reminds us of the many writers still in Soviet, satellite or Chinese prisons. The encounter between literature and communism remains both crucial and tragic.

AS A BRISK CHRONICLE presenting voluminous and scattered material in lucid order, this book has great virtues. But there is in *Literatur und Revolution* much superficiality. Often the problem is one of sheer brevity (there is not much new or revealing that can be said of an important writer in two or three pages). But often, also, it is Rühle's underlying assumptions that lead to oversimplification. Throughout the book, he seeks to establish a pattern of initial idealistic attraction followed by clear-sighted revulsion. The writer is drawn to the ideals of communism; he discovers the realities of party bureaucracy and Stalinist oppression; he breaks away. The Red gods have failed him. But in reality, this pattern is applicable only to a limited number of writers, and not to the most important. By insisting on it, Rühle tends to distort the evidence. Let me give only a few examples.

The case of Malraux is a test of a critic's insight into the temptations which totalitarianism offers to poetic genius. Rühle's account of Malraux's turn toward and away from communism is wholly inadequate. Though he has fought successively in alliance with the left and with the right, moving from the International Brigade to de Gaulle's cabinet, Malraux has never adopted a consistent political program. Whatever the area to which he turned, he has always pursued what there is in politics of heroism, violence, and conspiratorial loyalty. In short, his politics are esthetic; it is the formal shape of political action that draws Malraux, not the content. The clue to Malraux's entire career may be found in Walter Benjamin's brilliant observation that those who make of politics a fine art will always end in an elitist or totalitarian posture—whether on the left or on the right. Rühle fails to see this (and, by the way, does not even refer to Benjamin, who was probably the most original and profound of all Marxist critics).

Or take the case of Orwell. *1984* is not, as Rühle flatly asserts, a parable of the totalitarian rule of Stalin,

Hitler and Mao Tse-tung. The polemic of the fable is not unilinear. As Isaac Deutscher has shown, Orwell's critique bears simultaneously on the police state and on capitalist consumer society, with its illiteracy of values and its conformities. "Newspeak," the language of Orwell's nightmare, is both the jargon of dialectical materialism and the verbiage of commercial advertisement and mass media. The tragic strength of *1984* derives precisely from Orwell's refusal to see things in black and white. Our own acquisitive society appalled him. He noted in it germs of inhumanity nearly comparable to those endemic in Stalinism. Orwell came back from Catalonia with a kind of bleak, stoic faith in a humane socialism which neither East nor West are prepared to adopt on any but the most limited scale. To make of *1984* a pamphlet in the intellectual cold war is to misread and diminish the book. The true allegory of Soviet society in Orwell's work is *Animal Farm*.

The same reluctance to allow for the complications of truth influences Rühle's account of Lorca. Despite Rühle's confident statement, the circumstances of Lorca's death still remain puzzling. There may have been in them as large an element of private vengeance as of political terror. Or to give one more example, the intriguing thing about the young Polish writer Hlasko is not the fact that he found Communist Poland stifling and sought freedom in the West, but that he then found the "free world" almost equally intolerable. Literature is a complex, ambiguous pursuit; it does not fall naturally into the confines of communism or anti-communism which Rühle seeks to impose on it.

BUT THESE are cavils. A more essential flaw in *Literatur und Revolution* is Rühle's refusal to distinguish between Marxism and communism or, more exactly, between communism as a moral vision and communism as a bureaucratic and political reality. In Stalinist Russia and the satellite countries, this distinction was eroded. But elsewhere, and with respect to Western writers who fell under Marxist influence, it is crucial. Constantly, Rühle lumps together writers who may fairly be regarded as Communists and those who drew from the Marxist theory of history and the Marxist account of social conduct substance for their own art. One cannot talk in one breath of Howard Fast and Romain Rolland. The difference is too great.

Strictly speaking, there are few notable writers outside the Soviet Union who have put their art at the deliberate service of the Communist Party or of Soviet policy. Becher, Aragon, Anna Seghers, Fast—the list is not long. It certainly does not include most of the important poets, novelists and playwrights whom Rühle

is concerned with. What Feuchtwanger and Heinrich Mann gained from Marxism was a sense of the material pressures and density of historical fact. Sartre has drawn from Marxism support for his own highly personal vision of crisis and history. In Sean O'Casey, communism has never been more than the quixotic, mutinous outcry of an Irish sensibility against social injustice. In Malaparte, communism was a kind of private joke, the mask of a brutal but exacerbated romantic. To Pablo Neruda, the Communist ideology is a promise of vengeful utopia. Each case is different.

Moreover, there is a sharp distinction between those who have been disillusioned with Marxism and those who have actually broken with the Communist Party. In most instances, a break with the party leads either to silence or to Hollywood. A withdrawal from Marxism, on the other hand, appears to be a vitalizing process, leaving the imagination of the writer bruised but alive. Thus, in the lives of such writers as Camus, Steinbeck or Silone, Marxism has played a liberating role. Even when they have turned away from it, they retain in their talent certain characteristic precisions of insight and habits of moral protest.

And because Rühle refuses to distinguish between Hegelian-Marxist precepts and Communist practice, he fails to note the deep influence of Marxist ideas on Western esthetics and literary theory. Whether explicitly or unconsciously, our whole contemporary view of art is penetrated with a Marxist awareness of social context and historical dynamism. Even the most Alexandrine of "new critics" owes to the Marxist tradition some realization of the economic or social *milieu* that lies behind poetic style. Indeed, it may well be in esthetics, rather than in actual literature, that Marxism has made its most solid contribution. Yet Rühle scarcely mentions the three critics who, together with Lukacs, have brought to the West what is most fruitful in the Marxist view of art: Walter Benjamin, Lucien Goldmann and Edmund Wilson.

AS ONE PUTS DOWN this informative but one-sided book, a larger question springs inevitably to mind. Where have Marxism and communism been essential to the realization of individual talent? Where have they been accidental? Do we owe to the confrontation of literature and communism any masterpieces that might otherwise not have been conceived? Even if we set aside Russian poetry of the period 1917-1925, there are, I think, several.

Two of the greatest of modern novels, Malraux's *Man's Fate* and Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, stem directly from the impact of the Communist movement on

the life and imagination of the writer. They remain great, moreover, because they recognize in militant communism the co-existence of nobility and evil. If, in the proceedings of the party, one finds cruelty, cunning and the ruthless suppression of private values, one also finds sacrifice, courage and a fierce conviction of the capacity of men to live and die for ideas. Without Marxism and an eccentric but steadfast adherence to party ideology, the foremost dramatist of the age, Bertolt Brecht, might not have found his voice and style. The *Three-Penny Opera*, *Mahagonny* and *Mutter Courage* are classics of the modern imagination. They have passed into the repertoire of common feeling; but they are rooted in Brecht's personal communism and in the historical setting of the defeat of the German Communist movement. East Berlin is the city toward which Brecht was heading his whole life long.

Similarly, some of the finest poetry of Aragon is inseparable from the world view and vocabulary of communism. And the same, in a paradoxical yet decisive sense, is true of *Doctor Zhivago*. One cannot get that diffuse, meditative, often self-contradictory work into focus without realizing how deeply Pasternak was involved in the griefs and aspirations of the Russian Revolution. In many regards, the novel is a plea for a revolution even more total and inward than that which created Soviet society.

Elsewhere, the Marxist or Communist element in the work of art is often a superficial varnish or a convenient code to express a personal radicalism. That is certainly the case with the plays of O'Casey and the poems of Eluard. Often the attempt of the artist to serve the present needs of party ideology ends in grotesque misunderstanding: one recalls how Picasso, seeking to honor the death of Stalin, produced a portrait of a dreamy, vague young man with a Victorian moustache.

Finally, there is that most difficult question of the relationship between art and totalitarianism as such. History instructs us that autocracy, whether in Augustan Rome, in renaissance Florence, or at the court of Louis XIV, can engender great art and literature. Tyrants and poets have often got along quite well (even in Stalin, there were odd traces of this kinship—witness his treatment of Bulgakov and Pasternak). But how far can absolutism go before art falls servile or silent? Where do we cross the line between the artist as conveyor of the ideals of his society and the artist as maker of mere propaganda? Just where lies the difference between Andrew Marvell's ode to Cromwell and Becher's rhapsodies to Stalin and Ulbricht? If Rühle's book does not provide an answer, it at least sheds much valuable light on the nature of the problem.

What Makes a Communist?

*The Moulding of Communists:
The Training of the Communist Cadre,*
by Frank S. Meyer.
Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1961.

Reviewed by Karl A. Wittfogel

IN 1957 THIS reviewer discussed the subject of Communist mentality with a friend who a few years previously had broken with a major European Communist party: How seriously do seasoned Marxist-Leninists take the arguments of non-Communists who maintain friendly relations with them and who, in some cases, consider themselves Socialists? In this context I recalled my observations at the Congress of the League against Imperialism, which was held in Brussels in 1927 and which I attended as a young Communist. The comrades who organized this meeting treated the non-Communist Asian delegates, among them Jawaharlal Nehru, with the greatest courtesy. They listened with seeming approval to the arguments of these delegates, but they did so for purely tactical reasons. Despite their feigned affability, they maintained control over the official business of the Congress (the main resolution was written by the foreign editor of the *Rote Fabne*, the central organ of the German Communist Party); and among themselves they referred to the ideas of their temporary allies as "bourgeois" or "petty-bourgeois" notions, unworthy of any serious theoretical concern.

CLEARLY, the Communists do not, intellectually or morally, respect the representatives of the non-Communist world. My companion completely confirmed this observation on the basis of his own experiences in the USSR and Eastern Europe. More recently, a Chinese writer, Chow Ching-wen, who fled to Hong Kong after

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eight years of close cooperation with the Chinese Communists, reached an identical conclusion: the Peking rulers believe that prominent non-Communist national leaders such as U Nu, Nehru, and Sukarno can, if properly handled, be very useful to the Communist cause; therefore the Chinese Communists "do not attack these leaders, but they have no respect for them either."¹

The Communists follow a unique pattern of thought and action. Indeed, at crucial points, their behavior is at complete variance with basic rules of rational procedure. Michael Lindsay discussed this phenomenon in his pioneering study, *China and the Cold War* (1954), and Gerhart Niemeyer carried the analysis a step farther in another pioneering work, *An Inquiry into the Soviet Mentality* (1956). In Niemeyer's view, this irrational element is the product of the image of a future society which leads the Communists to a total rejection of all existing values and institutions. Frank Meyer, in his study *The Moulding of Communists*, has given the argument a new dimension by investigating the conditions which make the Communist "different from anything with which we are acquainted."

IF THE COMMUNIST is different, what forces and processes make him so? In answering this question, Frank Meyer draws upon his own history of 14 years' participation in the Communist movement in the United States and Europe. But his book is more than just a personal account. Others with a similar history have described their experiences primarily in personal terms, and Meyer gratefully acknowledges his debt to these autobiographical accounts. His own study, however, takes a different approach. It is concerned, not with the lives of single individuals, however representative they may be, but with the general forces that underlie and direct all their experiences. It is this approach that gives *The Moulding of Communists* its unique value.

Meyer makes allowances for diversities in personality and in national and cultural background; his reference

¹ Chow Ching-wen, *Ten Years of Storm*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1960.