

VIII. POLITICS AS A MEANS TO CULTURE

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The hopes of a resistance-movement, with its Cultural Upsurge based on the Trades Union, the Co-ops, and various local organisations, were now dead as doornails. Their place was taken for me by what I may call the Arena-concept: the bringing-together all that was best in the socialist and resistance literatures, from Pasternak to Neruda, from Tuwim to Tzara, plus a struggle to work out in our C.P. what was implied by a popular basis in culture without lowering of standards. The Cultural Committee, first under Emile and then under Sam Aaronovich, made effective progress in clarifying a theory of culture and in trying to spread it throughout the party. We managed in many ways to reverse the old notion of Art as a Weapon in the Class-War, seeing rather the Class-War (that is, the struggle to realise socialism) as a Weapon for the Liberation of Art – Art being defined as the expression of a full life, of the development of the all-round man. In communist society, we pointed out, politics would cease to exist, but art would be at the centre of living. Art was a weapon in the socialist struggle in so far as it helped men to realise the whole truth of their world, the potentialities of enjoyment which a divided society could only crucify and distort; but it was not a weapon in the narrow sense of aiding this or that tactic in the political conflict. It would [be] going too far to say that this viewpoint won the day in a simple sense, eradicating all sectarian tendencies, and so on; but it certainly began to emerge as a strong element in our thought, in many ways determining the direction of our discussions. At a big meeting held at Beaver Hall in 1955 it permeated the speeches – culture in politics being seen as a genuine feeling for people, not just for one particular set of needs such as housing (however important such needs might be at any moment), but rather for the full development of their lives. Thus the particular economic issues could be set in a broad perspective which stretched from the existing situation in all its details of deprivation and insufficiency to the future of achieved socialism with all its possibilities of freed and expanded energies. Many London branches were beginning to see how the concept of culture, grasped in these broad yet concrete terms, could have relevance to every aspect of party-work, revolutionising one's attitude to people and their problems.

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At the end of the first year Arena was in dire difficulties. The reviewers, the intellectual world, the booktrade, totally ignored it. But I think I can claim that its contents were of a high quality, including work by Montale, Vittorini, Tuwim, Angus Wilson, Malcolm Lowry (then quite unknown), Leonov, Aragon, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Dan Davin, Tikhonov and others; Nancy Cunard contributed a long essay with many examples of the work of anti-Franco Spanish poets in exile. Randall and I decided that the only hope of keeping it alive was to bring it closer to the developments inside the party which I have mentioned above. Meanwhile an odd interlude had come about. A young fellow, who had been pupil at a school where Davenport had taught, turned up with the offer of lavish finance. He had imbibed a vast respect for John, and had envied a friend in Paris who was backing an avant-garde magazine. His family were very rich (through one of the big chain-stores); and in the absence of his mother he was able to lay hands on quite a lot of cash. (His father was dead.) He offered to pour money into Arena; but John for some reason devised an alternative project. Let X put up some £20,000 or so for a new periodical with a chance of big sales. X agreed; and so Circus, edited by John and Randall, was born. Only three issues appeared before X's mother returned and made him withdraw what of the finance remained – not a great deal, I think. For work had been generously commissioned and fair amount of money had gone to the other side of pub-bars; the sales-side had not been considered with anything like the thoroughness that had gone into the editorial plans. Circus crashed. However Arena had had many aids through the venture; for instance, its overheads were all met out of the Circus-budget.

I recall the day of the crash as one of much comedy. A meeting of directors had been called. I had recently been asked to go on the board, and so was present. Randall came along with the resolve to resign, telling me that the whole thing had got out of hand; John came along without knowing of Randall's resolve, but meaning to use his considerable powers of bland persuasion to get another big lump-sum out of X; X came along with orders from his mother, very upset and trying to screw up his courage to inform the admired John that no more money was forthcoming. After a set of comedic misunderstandings, we all gave a cheer, and went to a restaurant along the street to drink champagne, at X's cost.

As a result of the Circus-interlude, I had taken over Arena as sole editor. No. 5 held an essay with many translations by Randall of Nazim Hikmet; ‘On the Human Scale’ by Eluard; a poem to Hikmet by Loudemis; poems by Guillevic and Montagu Slater; art by John Minton and Paul Hogarth; a section of Fučík’s Report from the Gallows. Randall and I contributed a Chronicle and Polemic. We had felt ourselves driven to a sharper dialogue than we had envisaged in No 1. The next issue concentrated on Greece, including the fine poem by Vrettakos, ‘33 Days’, as well ‘The Philosophical Journey’ by Jan Kott and the first section of a long analysis by myself of Coleridge; and the following one, ‘Recent Chinese Poetry’ by Arthur Waley, ‘The Murder of William Morris’ by E.P. Thompson, a piece by D.G. Bridson, and the rest of my Coleridge-analysis. But we had no hope of carrying further on. The last dregs of the finances of Fore Publications had drained away.

Meanwhile, as part of the developments of the Cultural Committee, there had been organised a conference, with a very large audience, at the Holborn Hall on 29 April 1951, on the American Threat to British Culture. We decided to print the main papers as an Arena publication, secure in the prospect of sufficient sales to make a little cash. In 1952 we did the same with papers at a similar Conference on the British Tradition.

The Authors World Peace Appeal had come into existence, mainly through the efforts of A.E. Coppard – though after a while he decided that it was not partisan enough in its political line, and resigned. For a couple of years the Appeal worked hard and did much good work, I believe, in making the first break through the atmosphere of the Cold War. The support among writers was genuinely broad; and on the committee (made up mainly of anarchists, pacifists, Left Labour, and C.P.) we achieved a non-sectarian attitude. The activities were aimed at shaking the war-mood that had settled down so on many people, attacking the influx of sadistic and war-propagandist U.S. Comics, etc., and so on. Naomi Mitchison, John Cousins, Pearl Binder and Monty Slater were among the most energetic members. But Dylan Thomas took it seriously, and Edith, at my suggestion, signed the Appeal, only to find that the U.S. passport authorities gave her hell when she soon afterwards wanted to visit the States. She didn’t however hold it against me.

As part of the general Arena-concept, and to help Fore financially, I had been trying to make the firm the vehicle for the issuing of the best works in the new socialist countries. We had begun with a version of Fučík's magnificent Report from the Gallows, which I had read in Prague, in a new and adequate translation by Stephen Jolly. I managed to get the Poles and Romanians to consider using us as the publishers for works they wanted to see in English and for which they were ready to pay much of the printing costs. We thus did a book on Mickiewicz. (I also did most of a scripted show on Poland put on at a London theatre, and later the script plus translations for a celebration of Mickiewicz. A book of translations was published by the Sylvan Press. After Tuwim's death I further did a scripted evening, using my translations, for the Polish Institute.) Among the books that Fore produced were Stancu's fine novel Barefoot and Sadoveanu's Mitrea Cocor¹. Randall with his usual good nature and gentle readiness to stand aside had given me free leave to go ahead as I liked, and if I had not done these things, Fore would have stood quite still; but I feel that I too easily assumed his acquiescence. Among my side-activities was a hope to bring about collaborations of poets and artists in the French way. But all that happened was my editing a collection of Leslie Hurry's work with a longish poem at the head, and my writing poems for some large woodcuts made by the Australian Noel Counihan – Collet's issuing poems and cuts (reduced) in a booklet, Peace is Our Answer. I had also been drawn into the orbit of Miron Grindea with his monthly Adam, and was with Joad a vice-president of his association. But apart from attending gatherings organised by Grindea (at one of which I met Sartre and told him that though a communist I much admired his work), I did little except admire Grindea's indefatigable energy in keeping Adam afloat and contribute an essay or poem now and then to its pages.

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In a way the considerable activities of this period expressed a wish to escape from the many unsolved problems that the controversy over Marxism and Contemporary Science had evoked. They represented the fullest possible expansion on the basis brought about by the truce

¹ Typo in typescript: Mirea Cocor.

between Emile and myself. That truce did not mean that I had deviated from my general direction as already developed. In Arena I continued fighting for my point-of-view, as indeed in all issues that came up; but I diverted my thoughts from the direct problem of grappling with Marxist theory in the polemical forms raised by my book. The reader may attribute this diversion to cowardice, if he wishes; but I think it rather represented the need for a period of recuperation. I had in a way gone too far ahead from such of my bases as were secure; I wanted to extend those bases before I once more put out my neck on such large issues. Also, I wanted to test out my ideas in practice – both in writings (novel and history, poem and translation) and in applications of the theory of culture we were evolving in the Cultural Committee. Probably I should also add that I was loath to cause trouble when the party had its back against the wall. I once said to Emile “When the party’s up against it, you’ll not find me a trouble; once things grow easier, look out.”

Two tales of the period. Once Alick, Doris Lessing, and myself were asked to address a gathering of the London party-lit. secretaries for the London district on the theme of the writer’s role. I forget what Alick said, but Doris claimed that modern society was too huge and complicated for the writer to deal with more than the small section that he knew intimately. I replied that Balzac, Dickens, Zola had had a much less extended and entangled society, but it had already become much more than any one could compass in his personal experience; they had to fill out their direct knowledge with imaginative insights and sympathies of all sorts. While the writer of today must beware of schematisms and stereotypes of abstract social constructions, in his work, he too must use his imagination, which, supplemented with a genuine Marxist comprehension, would enable him to achieve the broad view of a Balzac as well as the intimate details, if only he had the genius. Anyway it was up to him to test himself out to the limit, not to hedge him in with a timid acceptance of preconceived limits. In the discussion one of the first speakers was a Lit. Sec. who complained bitterly that writers had ignored the pressing problem of Housing. I pointed out that a month or two back L. & W. had published a very good tale by John Sommerfield, centred of this issue, at a cheap price. (I felt

that this episode expressed all too well the attitudes of sectarians who wanted writers to handle topical subjects, but weren't in the least interested when they happened to do so.)

My second tale also concerns Doris. She and I, as speakers for the Appeal, were to deliver speeches at some gathering in Hampstead on the role of the writer. Before the thing began, she told me that she had called in that afternoon to see Sam A. and had asked him what she should say, as her mind felt blank on the subject. Sam had laughed and said, "You say what you yourself think! You know that if I make some suggestions you'll be declaring in a few years that you had your views dictated by the party." A somewhat tactless remark, perhaps, but not without its justification. I ask my reader to turn to Doris's Golden Notebook where he will find the episode transferred to her first entry into the party and coloured in a rather different way. Not that I want to throw any bricks at Doris, whose talents I much respect, but because the transposition seems to me all too sad an example of the way in which exiles from the party tend to reconstruct their actual experience as a party-member.

In the Writers Group, I think at Monty's suggestion, we discussed and then set about producing a series of critical essays on the outstanding literary figures at that time: Eliot, Green, Orwell, Waugh. I tackled Eliot's verse and made a general statement. Monty, Alick, John Sommerfield collaborated. But Lawrence and Wishart didn't like the result, though we got no specific criticisms; and in the climate of thought in those years it was no use trying Marxist essays anywhere else. I had myself set to work before the publication of Marxism and Contemporary Science on a work on poetry, The Starfish Road (a title taken from Tzara's poem on Lorca) with subtitle, The Poet as Revolutionary. Beginning with the romantic revolt, I sketched its aesthetic and social bases, dealt at some length with Keats to show the cohering of a dialectical viewpoint, then dealt with Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, with lesser sections on Lautréaumont and Laforgue, and concluded with a section on Apollinaire, Eluard, Tzara, Aragon, Mayakovsky. I attempted to show how the deepening movement of poetic dissidence sought to find a structure and imagery-system which opposed bourgeois sensibility with new forms of integration, expressing new dialectical unities of mind and sense as a counterpart of its social revolt. The whole bias of the method lay in the position that the political aspects

were inseparable from the struggle to create a new sensibility, unitary in outlook and using correspondence-systems for an enriched grasp of dialectical relations both organic and political. Edith Sitwell was extremely keen to see the book in print; I have told in Meetings with Poets of her connections with the work. Dobson was ready to publish it and gave me a contract. Edith wrote him an enthusiastic preface and Alick did another foreword. (While praising much of the work, he insisted that my “concern with poetry after the industrial revolution as a revolt against the machine distracted from its real significance as an expression of the revolt against capitalism.” He seemed to think that the problem of the machine ceased once the latter was socially owned, whereas my aim had been to show that the machine created problems which led, via the proletariat, to the necessity for socialism, but which socialism, seen solely from the political-economy level, did not automatically solve.)

However I did not hand over my manuscript to Dobson; I tinkered with it adding sections on German poetry (Rilke, Georg and so on) and more on Russian Symbolism and Futurism; and then I put the book aside, dissatisfied. I knew that it would be ignored if published; but a similar knowledge about other books did not deter me from publishing them. I wanted to make it as effective as possible; but this led me to dilly-dallying. Though this book, by the nature of its theme, would not have aroused such an attack from orthodox Marxists as did Marxism and Contemporary Science, the effects of that latter book certainly had some part in my delays. But I should have stuck to the theme until I had a book which I felt I could pass. What drew me away was not so much failure of nerve as concentration on a different set of tasks.

3

The stimulus gained from the Pushkin Celebration had made me want to see more of socialism in action. In 1950 Ann and I spent six weeks in Czechoslovakia; in 1951 we paid a similar visit to Poland; in 1952 we were in Romania for a couple of months – for part of the time with A.L. Lloyd, Stanley Evans, and Maurice Cornforth, who now became a good and true friend. Again in 1953 I visited Romania as one of the judges for the Youth Congress. I have never cared for travel as a thing in itself. On my arrival in England in 1926 the first thing I wrote

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was the essay “Travel Narrows the Mind”, which the Manchester Guardian published; and my motto has always been that of Ovid: to change one’s skies is not to change one’s mind. In 1926 when I went to Paris and spent some months in Brittany it was to see P.R.S. or to have a cheap basis for living while I translated the Satyricon; in 1928 when I went to Florence, it was to see Norman Douglas in his natural habitat. In the postwar years I went to Zurich because I was active at the time in P.E.N, and to Paris because it was the city of the French resistance-poets. Travel with a definite purpose enriches one’s life; but without a point of active relationship to the new scene it has always seemed to me the expression of an empty and aimless mind. Now I was keen to see the new socialist countries in order to meet the writers there, discuss their work with them on the spot, and find out as much as possible how it was integrated with the new life. I will not here discuss these journeys in detail; it is enough to say that I found them deeply stimulating. As in my experiences of Russia and the Ukraine, there was a great deal I did not see and did not understand, but I had the feeling of a new life struggling into being despite many difficulties and obstructions. Here, as in the Soviet Union, I never saw those difficulties as merely a simple question of the Bourgeois Inheritance; it was evident that there was much confusion and bureaucracy, many authoritarian tendencies and facades of pseudo-democracy inside the party and around it. What I failed to gauge was the extent of the obstructive forces. I concentrated on what I saw and felt of the new forces at work. This led to incorrect judgments and an oversimplified perspective, but I still feel that it more truly grasped the situation than a view which saw only the distortions; I still believe that the last word lies with the positive and constructive elements. And in a sense has lain with them all along, even at the height of such terrible distortions as those dominating in the later Stalin epoch. Not that I accept for a moment the childishly oversimplified position generally put forward in the Soviet Union: that the popular initiative and the triumphant movement into socialism somehow went on side by the side with the bureaucratic and other tyrannies, unaffected by them except in peripheral ways. The two aspects of the situation were inextricably intertwined; and the springs of popular initiative were cruelly choked. Yet in the last resort the advance did go on; and the fascination of the situation lies precisely in the

extremely complex integration and fusion of positive and negative factors. The great task of Soviet literature is to penetrate the situation with a full insight into the powerful contradictions at work; and various writers in prose and verse have already taken up this painful but engrossing task, from Yevtuskenko, Vinokurov, Mezhirov, Voznesensky, Martynov and many more poets, to Simonov, Aitmatov, Cranin, Aksyonov, Tendryakov, Ivanter, Kazekevich, Solzhenitsyn and other devoted novelists.

I saw all that in a general way in 1951-5, but without an awareness of the depth and breadth of distortion. Similarly in a general way I was right enough in what I felt of the vast potentialities of the socialist situation in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, but wrong in the assessment of the difficulties facing both writers and people. In Warsaw I had the good luck to stay at the Bristol for a week or so with Bertolt Brecht, so that I was able to have a number of pleasant chats with him; I was also present at a long session he had with a group of young poets, in which he gave them advice in his serious and ironic tone. One of the Poles said to me, "He's the only German who could visit us now, the only one we wouldn't resent and detest." I was in the Press Club when Helene Weigel gave a reading of his poems. Over breakfast he several times narrated the plot of plays he was going to write; in detail and with much enjoyment. After a visit we paid to the Sirena Theatre he remarked, "I had always assumed that elegance and socialism won't go together, but Poland is making me change my mind." Here is a poem I wrote him one night. From our room we looked down on a shattered building with a small cleared space in its midst; there, under a soft arc light, a couple were dancing.

I looked down from the window high above the street
and saw in the opposite ruin a cleared-out space
with an arc-light cutting the midnight
and in the heart of the light two dancers
and I thought of you asleep in a room below
and the Warsaw of rubble all round us in the shattered night.
And there was no one alive in Warsaw that moment
in Warsaw in Poland on the earth
but the couple who danced in the jag-edged island of light.
And didn't seem to matter,
it was possible, necessary, and good,
that no one was left alive but the dancing couple,
as long as they danced in the wound in the ribs of night,

as long as they danced.

I who have loved the summer abundance,
the hand-in-hand dancers ringing the earth,
and have said that nothing else justified the struggle,
have always felt more at home in winter
in loss privation aloneness
the absolute of death.
I distrust all easy embraces,
all gifts whatsoever, all words,
save those that have passed the test of silence.
We must recognise alienation
before we can live unalienated,
recognise it in our bones and the sudden shaft of light,
the momentary impact
when we are all men because we are nobody,
when we are alive because we are dead,
when we are in contact because we are cut-off.
I see you smiling as you talk.
I see the dancers circling the fragile island of survival.
After all I do not care what happens,
what happens to myself or anyone
as long as the dancers are there, ignoring us all.

At the heart of my darkness,
at the heart of your silence as you smile.
Where could they dance except in the night of Warsaw?

So at moments I thus felt the tragic image rise up in my mind, despite my jubilant concentration on the positive aspects of socialist construction. And indeed that slight poem expressed more deeply my reaction to Poland with its bitter obdurate daredevil element than any simple acclamation of constructive purposes, however important that latter might be. As we drove in the countryside, the Pole with us remarked, "Why, we're quite close to Chopin's birthplace." So we turned up a rough road and in a few minutes were bogged in snow and slush; three soldiers slouching across the fields, homing on leave, lent us their shoulders and we got the car out. But we gave up looking for Chopin's birthplace. At a rehearsal of turns for some performance at a factory we found the workers had smuggled in a traditional dance-song of the Journey to Siberia. In Zakopane the wife of a high official concerned with party-education praised of the classic poets Krasinski and discomfited her husband by asking us, "Why is it that the British get their Marxist quotations wrong and do the right thing, and the Russians do the opposite?" Clearly she was reciting a common phrase with "British"

substituted for “Polish”. When I told Leopold Infeld the physicist (who had returned from Canada) how much I liked the experimental theatre at Cracow, he asked me urgently to write them a letter expressing my appreciations. Clearly they were under attack and needed allies. Jan Kott, going up with us to the top of the ski-ing hill remarked how much he hated the exercise; last year he had broken or fractured his leg. When I asked him why he still skied, he said that he hadn’t the courage to stop while the others were doing it.

On our return from Prague in 1950 we stayed a while in Paris. I wanted to see Claude Morgan. Told that he was working on the Peace Committee dealing with preparations for the forthcoming Sheffield conference, I rang him up at their office to arrange a lunch-appointment. When a week or so we were on the boat approaching Folkestone, I said to Ann as a joke, “Look, it seems as if MI5 is out in force to greet us.” I was referring to the stalwarts with handlebar moustaches and the like who were assembled on the wharf. When we landed, I found to my astonishment that my joke was no joke at all. Ann and I were taken to pieces by the secret service. My shoes were carefully searched for papers. We had a couple of Czech dolls given to us by Jan Drda, based on well-known puppets; one of them had a large Bolshy beard. The agents contemplated these for a long time, inspecting them for re-sewings; I told them to keep them and examine the stuffings at leisure if they liked. At long last they reluctantly let us go. Later I realised from one or two of their remarks that they suspected us of smuggling-in funds for the Peace Conference. The Paris line had been tapped, and my message to Claude Morgan had been interpreted as meaning that I was an emissary ready to carry contraband to England. The fact that I was coming from Prague no doubt also made me a suspicious character at this moment. (It will be recalled that the British government blocked the entry of so many delegates that a last-minute decision had the Conference transferred to Warsaw.) The only other time I have been badly treated by customs or their aides² was when in early 1954 I was going to Amsterdam to speak at a Peace Meeting of intellectuals on behalf of the A.W.P.A. At the Hook an official carried my passport off and kept me waiting some

² Typo in typescript: ‘aids’.

hours while he phoned various higher-ups to find out what to do with me; then he let me go. Only when I was back at the Hook on my way out of Holland did I notice that he had deliberately neglected to stamp my passport. The officials began to cause trouble, asking me how I had managed to slip into Holland, when I luckily caught sight of the first man some distance away, ran and took hold of him. He at last admitted that he had let me into Holland and had not stamped my passport.

In Romania I again met Stancu (known at the Pushkin Celebrations) and his delightful wife, and we spent some happy times together, in Bucarest and Sinaia. I spent much of my stay collecting information and talking to people about the way the many national minorities were treated. We visited Târgu Mureş and Timișoara as well as Constanța; indeed I think I was the first foreigner to go into the Serb regions close to the Yugoslav borders. On our return to Timișoara, our translator said to me cheerfully, “Well, I’m pleased we got back safely. I thought it quite likely a kulak might take a shot at you to create an incident.” Up to this point I had refused to take any stand on the Stalin-Tito quarrel, merely feeling ashamed at the extent to which spying of Secret police on both sides came out. But now, listening to the fervent accounts of the passionately hospitable Serbs in the villages about the lot of their close relatives a few miles away across the border I began to feel that there must be a case against Tito. Never, except on a Ukrainean farm or in an Abkhasian tobacco-village, have I seen such sheer abandonment of earthy enjoyment as at the New-Life farm; such moments are the rare highlights of one’s whole life. A few lines from an account written down in the next few days:

But the whole village is waiting for us down the tree-shaded road, at the culture-centre. We rise and hurry along. A pioneer welcomes us, and flowers bloom in our arms. We go into the hall, into which a packed mass of people, young and old, are waiting in patient excitement. Two lads pull the red curtains back on the stage, and wind themselves up in them at the end, but the tremendous gusto of the performance makes up for any technical hitches. The young people sing, they dance, they sing, they play music on Serbian stringed instruments and accordions, they sing – with passion and with clear hard peasant voices that come out of the very heart of song in a way that concert-trained voices never do. The schoolmaster, who acts as choir master stands perilously on the edge of the stage with his back to the audience, sets the key with a chirp, and off they go: Love of the Collective Farm or the Song of the Yugoslav exiles. When he turns to the applause, no maestro at

Covent Garden was ever so delighted – or so sincerely happy in the happiness of his performers. Stern young pioneer girls recite poems that wither Tito with their pure ecstatic scorn. Little boys peep under the curtain. The lad in the green shirt dances the hora with a mad agility that is explained by the fact that he is the leading footballer of the village. The schoolmistress and another girl sing a duet.

At last it ends, and the entangled audience begins to unpack itself. We go back to the farm-offices and find the band there before us, playing folksongs in the corridor. Tables are put together in a long line, and a girl in a quilted blue coat brings tsuica in – the tsuica of the farm, a little stronger than the shop-stuff. The plum-brandy toasts begin. Putnik's son-in-law, red and furious with joy, shouts, "We had a hard life in the past, but now we are free and welcome you here to taste the fruits of our Labour." Putnik pours out, and says to some demurrer, "I'm master in my own house."

A man leans over says, "He was always a fighter for the workers -- long before the war, a good man."

Putnik claps his hands in excess of happiness. He gives the toasts. "A good life for all men."

A marriage is being celebrated in the village. The father-in-law of the bride comes in his short-sleeves and cropt head. He embraces his first son-in-law, a young fair-haired Serb, who has come with us from Timișoara, and invited us to the rejoicings.

We go along the pavement lined on each side with a double row of trees. A small Serb tries to tell us in soft urgent tones of his past sufferings and the new life. What words can utter such a liberation? "My children will be happy, my children will be happy... They will grow up in an innocent world. So we must have peace. I had no chance to learn, but my children will learn, they will know everything, they will possess the earth. We must have peace, peace. This year the electricity has come. With peace everything else will come."

There is a small crowd, mainly made up of dancing couples, at the wedding reception. We go down the passage into the hot thickly-packed room where the merrily-rounded mother of the bride somehow clears the space by the big stove to get us before the warmfaced decorated couple. The wife of our friend from Timișoara is there too, a lovely darkeyed girl. But now everyone is singing, shouting. The older farmers tilt bottles of rum to their mouths. "Who are you?" a farmer asks. "English," – and at once he wants to pour out gallons of rum for us. He doesn't ask how and why we are there, or what is an Englishman doing in this frontier-village. It is enough that we are there, and the world is good. "To Peace!"

They want us to stay for three days at least. They are preparing a dozen dishes for us. They bring bottles of rum, tsuica, wine. We own the world, and we give it to you. The fiery son-in-law of Putnik shouts a toast of goodwill, and I reply, "I knew that the Serbs were free, but I did not know that they were so joyously free." The confused lights are blown softly and strangely in the low room where there is no space to move and everyone is moving riotously. They are even dancing the hora. Ann goes to dance in the street with a burly wild-eyed Serb. Putnik waves his arms, blessing the world.

The Timișoara son-in-law manages somehow to convince the others that we cannot stay. We move out among the dancers and fluttering flowers of rosy light. The deep tree-shadowy streets of the

village rustle and ring with the echoes of all the hymeneals of time. Here is a free world, and its signature is joy.

A man with spectacles draws us suddenly into a house. “You can’t go till you’ve sat down. You can’t do it. This is a Serb house. And when you sit down, you can’t go till you’ve had something to drink. No one has ever done so monstrous a thing as refuse to sit down, and having sat, to drink. It is our custom. Look at my magnificent children.” Putnik’s son-in-law turns on the light, but the sleepy children do not seem to mind the noise, the glare. They turn over and sleep, and we go into the next room, to sit down and drink more glasses of tsuica. “Life is good. Tell everyone. Tell your people.”

At last we are in the street again, and near the cars. Everyone wants to tell us all over again about the new life, to say all the crucial things they’ve forgotten to say – the things they now see so clearly by the light of the marriage-dance and the red flowers. “Come again!” Putnik embraces us with a fierce friendliness; his son-in-law with shouting heartiness. Our cheeks are tingling from their powerful bristles. “Don’t worry if your cars get bogged. We’ll get all the tractors out,” says Putnik.

We slither down the muddy roadway, trying to drive among the thistle and grass at the side. Our Skoda races ahead, and soon we don’t know where we are: “Where do you think...?” “Probably in Yugoslavia,” someone replies.

If anyone thinks that the remarks of the small Serb about his children, for instance were mere propaganda trumped up for a foreigner, he is badly mistaken. Such things were overwhelmingly sincere. Whether one would hear the same words in the same tones in that village today, I doubt; for good and bad things must have settled down to a different sort of pattern, where the contrast with the old days is no longer so acute, and where new problems have emerged – how to keep that original spirit of rebirth in the everyday struggle against all sorts of grinding-down pressures. But I believe that in all the socialist countries, however solely-tried and submitted to flattening pressures from above, the lively and brotherly thing is still there, ready always for a more effective assertion.

But for the other side: the young writer P. Dumitriu, whose book on the Black-Sea Canal was being much discussed at that time impressed me as a genuinely socialist writer. I wrote down:

He was striding one cold November day in 1949 along the construction-road of the future town of Poarta Alba. Work had scarcely begun, but he felt the great stirring forces and saw in the

crude and confused moment already the rich pattern of what was to be. An old song sang in his mind: Danube, Danube, you highway with no dust. And the theme of his book, Dustless Highway, took body. “I was talking with the mason Dumitru,” he says, “a shockworker, in the shelter of housewalls under construction. He told me his life, his plans. The lashing steppe-wind stippled our faces with sharp sand-grains. One of my novel’s characters was born.”

I took Dumitriu as an exemplary case of the young writer able to enter into the new life I had seen intoxicating the Serbian village and other places in Romania; able to realise and depict the expansion from peasant community-and-separateness to socialist fraternity through participation in the new labour-tasks. Some eight years later he fled from Romania and the Communist Tyranny which he described in his novel Incognito. I am not setting up here to assess his experiences and his responses; but I can validly comment on his second novel written away from the tyrannous controls, Westward Lies Heaven (1966). Here one sees a talented writer trying honestly to describe the anarchist revolts of the young in the West, haunted by the spirit of Dostoevsky’s Possessed; the result is flat, even repellent, because he has no Archimedean-fulcrum from which to shift his earth, no social perspective whatever for his critique. He may have suffered constrictions under Communist Tyranny; under Capitalist Freedom, he suffers the total death of mind and body, inhabiting a dead and meaningless world where galvanic twitches masquerade as life.

Not that this comment must be taken as meant in any way to palliate the constrictions and dogmatisms against which he validly protested; and however we interpreted his flight, its bitter annotation of my bright picture of the socialist writer and his exciting chances remains. And here is another such dark footnote. In Bratislava in 1950 I mentioned that I had been in Moscow with Novomeski the previous year. Our translator, a young girl-student, at once became enthusiastic and said that we must meet again; clearly he was very popular among his fellow-Slovaks. I had been uneasily aware of some obscure hesitation and evasion in Prague

when I spoke of Novomeski, and I now pressed to see him. The translator went to much trouble and he was found. He had dinner with us before we went to the opera; our conversation was light-hearted, mainly about poetry. I told him that Tzara had spoken highly of his work, and I would like to know it. He said that the resistance-struggles and then the politics of recent years had rather cut him off from poetry; he seemed a trifle disconcerted about this but was otherwise his cheerful self. (He had a position in the Slovak government, I think as Minister of Education.) On my return to England, I heard that he had been arrested a few days after our dinner. I did my best to make inquiries, but could learn nothing; then I heard some time afterwards of his condemnation as a Slovak nationalist. Though I had not known him well (we possessed no common language), I was quite convinced that he was not, and could not be, a traitor. I was disquieted, then, as happens with matters one cannot understand, I forgot about him³. Similarly Randal and I tried to find out what had happened to Edith Bone after the rumor came that she had been arrested in Hungary but Emile who had known her well and collaborated with her in such work as translating Alexei Tolstoy, insisted that he could get no details. And then, as one does with matters one doesn't understand and can get no further light on, I began to wonder if I was right in worrying. After all, I had known Edith Bone only slightly; she had at times a very acid tongue; I recalled her making sharp comments on Lysenko at the height of his reputation, at the Soviet Embassy of all places. (Not that I considered Lysenko a sacred subject, but he had been used as a means of attack on the Soviet Union – in many respects all too correctly, as it turned out.) In the same way, I fancy, many persons in the Soviet Union managed to evade the questions arising from arrests of which they knew in Stalin's days; the wish to avoid dangerous or unpleasant matters easily leads to an agnostic position. "After all, I don't really know; X or Y may have been a traitor."

In 1951 Ann and I had moved to a cottage at Castle Hedingham, which Ann's father bought for us; we wanted to be near the Swingers at Pebmarsh. Early in 1954 Ann died. I was in a distracted state, and for once accepted an invitation to travel without a specific aim. The

³ Lindsay footnote: As I write (May 1971) I see that N is afresh in trouble, expelled from the Slovak Central Committee.

Woosters kindly asked me to go with them to Mt. Eryx in Sicily; Mrs. Wooster had been reading Samuel Butler on the Odyssey and Nausicaa's home. I agreed to go. On the second day, a little south of Auxerre, their new secondhand car blew up in some way inexplicable to my non-mechanic mind; one of the doors had already come off near Fontainebleau. They were taking some atomic device to the physics department of Genoa University, we decided we could use the money thus available to meet the extra-expenses of train-journeys and the like. So we carried our loose and large luggage, plus the atomic device, across Burgundy by various buses, reached Dijon, located the one hotel that would meet traveller's cheques late at night, and took the train for Genoa. We went on to Rome, then Naples and Pompeii, then Palermo, Agrigento, and Eryce. I was able to turn thing from a holiday (which I have always detested) into an occasion for study. The time spent at Pompeii led to my Writing on the Wall, and I felt that I would use what I had learned at Monreale and elsewhere in due time. Then later in the year came an invitation to the Soviet Union: to lecture at the Fielding Celebrations. When I arrived, they asked me to stay on for the 2nd Writers Congress; and as the Congress kept on being postponed, I ended by staying over 3 months. I could have wandered round, but contented myself with a journey to Tbilisi and its environs (especially the Aragva valley, where I went with the poet Leonidze), then across Abkhasia (Sukhumi, Pitsunda, Gagra), ending at Sochi. I felt thoroughly at home among the jovial, fiery and warmhearted Georgians; an outstanding event was the day (and most of the night) at the Ahkhasian tea-village, where, as a result of the hospitable wine, I delivered a rousing speech on the need to resist the levelling and debilitating effects of Tchaikovsky's music, and to stick to their own folk-songs, after which I danced with a couple of village-elders.

Coming down next morning at breakneck speed along hairpin bends in precipitous hills, I arrived blessedly at a bay with ancient pines and cool water lapping: into which I plunged as they told it was where the Argonauts had landed in Colchis. An example of the hatred of Beria: Leonidze had given [me]⁴ the booklet of his poems translated into Russian by

⁴ Omitted in typescript.

Tikhonov; a Georgian with me in a train noticed a reference to Beria (who in an early administrative job had been concerned in the draining of the Colchis swamps); he at once scored the stanza heavily out; and soon afterwards the booklet disappeared. I am sure he managed to throw it out of a window.

Back in Moscow I saw the November celebrations and at long last the Congress began. Now I was joined by my Dutch friend Theun de Vries. Aragon and Elsa also arrived. I had been meeting many Russian writers, and became especially friendly with Azhayevev (author of Far from Moscow) and the poet Mikhail Lukonin, two very different characters: Azhayevev, gentle and vulnerable – after I had introduced him to Alan Sillitoe in London and we had lunch together, Sillitoe said to me, “That man’s face: he has been through hell.” Azhayevev, who had lost one eye had a self-sacrificial element, a yearning to immolate himself somehow on the altar of socialist construction, socialist realism as an all-demanding ideal. Lukonin was tough without being hard, a fighter more able to face the full facts, secure in the last resort in a rejoicing lyricism. From the first days I had said that I would stay on in Moscow only if I had some work, so almost every day I read Russian poetry, mostly with Oksana Krugerskaia, with the view of [a] book of translations. When the Congress opened I found that Lukonin, with Marshal, Pogovin, Shchipachev, and a couple of others was proposing that the Union of Writers should be abolished – a gesture of dissent which wasn’t taken seriously. I followed the proceedings with intent interest. My months in Moscow and the south had enabled me to get a much better idea of daily Soviet life, and though I was happy enough, I felt the lack of something essential, which I could best explain as a failure to develop Marxism – or rather a refusal to begin even facing the fact that it needed development. Where the blame lay, I could not yet make out. I found that no one with whom I spoke had even heard of the term Alienation. I came across several traces of anti-semitism, but they all seemed reducible to personal cases, to survivals of pre-1917 attitudes, not to anything in the system itself.

At the Congress there was much that stirred me, also much I could not quite comprehend. Looking back, I can see that here was the first effective statement of the discontents that in a couple of years led to Khrushchev’s secret speech against Stalin – though

there was much of the old complacencies mixed in with the bolder declarations. Once again I shall quote what I wrote at the time so that I may not seem wise after the event. First, Surkov's report:

The postwar works – what of them? Here Surkov's report became rather a series of questions, of criticisms and complaints. The positive hero had too often become thin and idealised, or, worse, had thought that to beat the bumptious drum of his personality was to give leadership. Surkov went on to list various bad tendencies, formalism or over-subjectivism, Leftist attitudes in criticism and “bourgeois nationalism” which tried to pass off bloody conquerors of the past as people's heroes. Critics had too often taken a hectoring tone and a one-sided approach. Writers had too often made no attempt to find the new form which expressed the new content. Back-scratching and lack of principle led to Stalin Prizes for poor works. The theory of “no conflict” had sadly weakened literature wherever it seeped in – the theory that socialist society had no fundamental conflicts, that at most it witnessed a harmless debate between the good and the better, not a clash of good and evil.

Where had the theory come from? Nobody seemed to know; but writers, critics and readers alike, at one time, had been to blame. The critics, so far from noticing how false and destructive the theory was, how it contradicted the law of development in society and individual, had been the chief propagators of it. And when the falsity of the theory was uncovered, many swung to the other extreme and wanted everything painted in the darkest colours. Ordinary life was too little left out of books. Young writers were not sufficiently coming forward. There were fewer members under the age of thirty in the Union than ever before.

Formulations that might have their flaws, but not to be accused of smugness. There was unanimity in attacking the developments under Stalin's postwar years -- though he was never mentioned. (Nobody raised the point that the no-conflict theory was obviously started off by those who were afraid of the real and deep conflicts being dealt with.) All the speakers agreed that there had been a serious weakening in postwar years. “For the first time there was a retreat from socialist realism,” said the poet Yashin; Sholokhov talked of a “disaster”, a universal deluge of greyness, dullness, and bad writing. The Congress insisted that literature had lagged behind life, and that meant “to miss life, to put in place of the many-faceted thing an outwork pattern which may have had a certain validity once, which now distorts and obstructs reality.”

For some time before the Congress there was a discussion about the positive hero, which ended by becoming very scholastic and abstract ... It hovered round the question: Can a positive hero have negative traits? And if so, how many? At its worst the argument tended to ask: If 12½ % of negative traits are permissible in his make-up, does

he fail in his role if the percentage rises to 21%? The method underlying this sort of approach was for the writer to draw a quite schematic character of angelic qualities, then to try to provide some human ballast by adding a few spiritual warts and wens, with the *sotto-voce* aside, “You see that the wonderful creature is really human like the rest of us ...” The contribution of the people to this debate was to point out that there was no statistical solution of the problem of the hero, no way of drawing up schemes and formulas beforehand. The hero existed in life, in the day-to-day concrete struggles of men and women changing the face of the Soviet Union and when the writer had a secure participation himself in that process, his heroes would emerge as real people, with all the complex fullness and contradictions of real people. And when that happened, neither he nor anyone would raise abstract questions about the equation of positive and negative in their make-up ... Other writers, in their zeal to deal with industry, wrote excellent treatises on the techniques of labour, but left the men and women dwarfed by the machine – thus inverting the principles of socialist realism, which seeks always to show how men are themselves transformed by the struggle to transform nature.

Or by a diametrically opposed but equal error, they tried to show heroes who never entered into the labour-process at all, into the real struggles of people which are at every point involved with the problems of work. Here came the divagation into the cult of personality, of Napoleonic characters who turned up like a mighty wind and blew everyone forward into success without any genuine confrontation of difficulties and resistances. Babayevsky’s Cavalier of the Gold Star was an outstanding example of the Napoleonic approach – a book which was vastly boosted by the critics at the time of its appearance, not for its virtues, but for its vices. As Simonov pointed out, the very title was ominous. For it is the Decoration not the Man, the lordly hero who thinks that socialist positions can be won by the demagogic leadership who dominates the scene ... Other novelists merely used easy formulas for setting up obstacles and then knocking them down, trusting in a rosy mist to blur the edges of things into optimistic confusion.

It will be noted that the term Cult of Personality had thus already come up, though it was not yet applied to Stalin. In my notes I listed also the attack on “objectivism”, by which was meant the assumption of a detached gods-eye-view by the writer leading to subjective loss of values. Traits of Objectivism were said to occur in Panova, Ehrenburg, V. Nekrasov, Kazekevich. At the time I did not notice that this formula was being used to deter writers from coming too close to the Stalinist realities; the so-called objectivists were in fact often too passionately partisan of the humanist values that were feared by those still trying to hold up veils, however tattered, round the worst sides of past and present. However, on the whole Simonov gave a powerful analysis of the tendencies that had undermined the literature of the postwar years. He

also analysed the very common situation where a young writer produced one good and promising book, became an accepted Writer, and then wrote nothing or else only inferior works. Excellent too was the almost universal execration of soviet critics, who uniformly attacked anything new and alive, and who steadily praised the moribund long after it stank in everyone else's nostrils. They had fostered the no-conflict theory. "They encouraged the conventional and the dull. They were generally so cowardly and scared that they long hesitated to write anything about a new book or play, and waited till someone plunged into print or they got wind of an important person's attitude, and then they all howled in chorus." A writer told me, "There are many good critics, but often they're in the institutes and so on, or they're practicing writers who don't normally carry on criticism." Shchipachev made a detailed attack on the way in which the work of the early poet Kashin had been suppressed. (I may add that at the Satire Theatre I saw excellent satire on bureaucracy in ordinary life and in cultural matters.) Lukon and Yashin at the Congress or in articles made fine calls for courage and for attack on the dangerous unknown. I noted, "Many of the best speeches were made by poets: Lugovskoi, Olga Bergolts, Isakovsky, Kirsanov, Marshal, Yashin." I myself spoke on the national roots and differences of Socialist Realism.

I returned to England early in 1955, convinced that something of great importance was happening in the U.S.S.R., though not at all clear as to what it was. I'll cite one more episode to illustrate my feeling. One day in Moscow I noticed in passing that an academician was holding a show of his chosen works. I went in and found the paintings to be of the most uninspired kind. But what was interesting was a group of students accompanied by an older woman who was trying to make them see some virtue in the canvases. "Show me one patch of paint, one drop of paint, which the artist has really felt, and I'll agree with you," a lad said. Before a picture of a soldier sitting on a knoll with his girl, the woman asked, "Now doesn't that move you?" "It didn't move the artist – why should it move me?" the lad replied contemptuously. Such episodes made me feel how far ahead of the accepted canons were sections of the public, especially of the young people. I had always been heartened when I spoke to a group of students; their ardent interest surrounded me with warmth of response,

with endless questions, yet suffered somehow from a certain limitation hard to define but coming down in the end to the conviction that Marxism was taught in a narrow mechanistic way. There is so much that is good, I often thought, but what is going to break this closed circle?

Soon that circle was [to] get a rude shock, if not to be fully broken. But before that happened I worked at a book on the literary situation, at Emile's suggestion. I had been taking part in party literature-schools at Hastings, which helped me to think out some of the points I wanted to make. After the Thirties opened with an analysis of the attitudes of various writers during the anti-fascist front the 1930's, using their own statements as the basis. Then went on to suggest some of the more valuable trends emerging after the worst of the Cold War period, discussed certain basic aspects of all art (such as Rhythm), and attempted to deal with key-points of socialist writing, especially "the pangs and problems of change," and "the heroic and the typical." It turned out that the moment was a most unfortunate one in which to attempt such an analysis; for the 1956-crisis promptly burst over the book, making certain aspects of it at once out-of-date – in the sense that they needed to be reformulated with more orientation to the problems and questions arising out of that year. Looking back at it, I think the first section still holds its ground, the second (dealing with contemporary trends) is the weakest, and the later parts are unequal. As I wrote, the extreme reactionary complacency of consensus in the Cold War period was being broken by the Angry Young Men, the first symptom of an awakening to the drastic gap between the pretences of our postwar society and its rat-race realities. My perspective was inevitably that of the Cold-War, and this badly limited the book. Best in the latter section seems to me such passages as that discussing the relation of the writer to genuine popular speech. Taking several examples from my own experience, I show that:

you see certain things in common. Each is succinct and sums up a situation ... In each statement, then, we see two aspects: a capacity to grasp the social essence of a situation and to express it with a bold simplicity which is based on the clear imaginative grasp. Note further how in each remark there is a fusion of opposites ... In each case the inner conflict moves to a resolution, and the resolution is based in a movement into a clearer and stronger social consciousness. Here it is then that common speech is one with the poetry. But this element in the common man is not an easy thing to

take over; it isn't a formalistic trick, which, once invented, does the job without further effort by the writer. We can't capture it by going round with an assiduous notebook. We can share its qualities only by sharing in the struggles of its begetters.

The Bodley Head had also published my Life of Meredith, meant as a follow-up to the Life of Dickens. I had early read a few works of Meredith such as The Egoist and The Shaving of Shagpat, and had a vague respect for him without any clear image of his place in the novel. Then, collecting material for our essay on the effects of the Paris Commune on English writers (for the Modern Quarterly) I felt that I should see if Meredith had anything to say about the event. Noting that Beauchamp's Career was the next novel in date after the Commune, I read it and was surprised and delighted at its clear eye on the English social and political scene. I then set to and read all Meredith's works; a glance through the various biographies or studies showed that no effort had been made to get inside his work; I felt in honour bound to make a tribute to his gallant and intelligent career, his many deep poetic and psychological insights, his powerful effort to introduce the political theme without dereliction of the novel's artistic purpose and nature. In America my book found a fair response; in England, none at all. One of the points that had interested me in considering Meredith was the effect of the loss of the popular audience (as still existent for Dickens) on the writer who was able to penetrate the false-face of English class-society; I meant to continue with a book on Hardy and Gissing, who revealed the next stage in this dissociation, by my interests were drawn elsewhere.