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Reading in a tent.

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READING IN A TENT

By K l a u s M a n n

Somewhere in Italy...

In the evening I have time to read. I don't care for the movies (or rather, I d o care for them, but the recent Hollywood output curiously fails to appeal to me); nor am I particularly attracted by U.S.O. shows or crap shooting. So reading remains my favourite pastime -- in the field as in civilian life.

They sent me some recent books from back home -- not quite new publications, but new to us "over here": Strange Fruit, for instance (which I just started reading), and Seidel Canby's Walt Whitman (quite a treat for an old Whitman fan like me), and Arrival and Departure, by that uncannily intelligent chap, Arthur Koestler, who has always something worthwhile to say and always knows how to make his message colourful and dramatic. (The drama of Arrival and Departure, however, is a little depressing, as far as its political message is concerned, and somewhat anticlimactic in its literary structure. The opening part is fascinating -- especially the love story --; the middle episode, with the hero's psychoanalysis, is interesting enough, but maybe a trifle on the obvious side -- as it often happens when the technique and the slogans of psychoanalysis are employed in fiction. As for the ^{last} ~~third~~ part, it struck me as rather perfunctory and lacking in inspiration.)

But it is the classics -- the venerable standard works of world literature -- which, for one reason or another, seem to be the favourite reading matter of men living in tents. I have noticed

this predilection in many of my comrades, whom I saw spending long evenings with volumes of the Modern Library -- Don Quixot, The Arabian Nights, or Anna Karenina. In my case, it was, among other things, Voltaire's delightful Candide, which helped me forget, for a while, the horrors and boredom of modern war.

Voltaire's skepticism is not discouraging but comforting. -- for all its bitterness. He shows us -- and in no other work more convincingly and charmingly than in Candide -- that the world has always been a crazy mess; that the belief in ideals is a preposterous form of quixotism (although Voltaire was, of course, an incurable idealist himself); that life is hopelessly cruel and terrible, but at the same time incredibly, screamingly funny. Candide is one of the saddest and one of the funniest books ever written.

The conclusion to which the idealistic skeptic comes, is useful enough, if a little homespun and not without problematical implications. "Let us work without thinking!" he advises us. "That's the only way to ^{make} ~~render~~ life bearable.... Il faut cultiver notre jardin." (This famous axiom is, I believe, somewhat dangerous, as it seems to justify, or even to recommend, the attitude of selfishness and Isolationism -- both individual and national...)

In another facetious masterpiece by Voltaire which I also re-read in this wilderness -- Le Monde comme il va... -- the "last word of wisdom" sounds even more cynical. The angel who has been sent to earth to inspect the vices and follies of "Persepolis" -- which is, of course, Paris in a transparent Oriental disguise --, ^{makes up his mind} that, instead of trying to change the world, one should rather let it go as it is: "car, dit-il, si tout n'est pas bien, tout est passable."

Yet, somewhat paradoxically, Voltaire ^{insists} on his right, and on the necessity, of criticizing the world "which is not good but passable". In his remarkable parable, "The Good Brahman," the erudite hero -- "overwhelmed by his curiosity and ignorance" -- exclaims: "I wished that I were not born! I have kept studying for forty years -- forty long, lost years! I try to teach something to others, and I am ignorant myself." -- But offered to exchange his difficult plight for the contentment of his neighbour, who is happy -- and idiotic, the Good Brahman replies:

"I have examined my heart, and I see that I would not want to be happy, ^{if it meant that I have to be} ~~on the condition of being~~ stupid... Thus I came to the conclusion that, if happiness is important to us, intelligence is even more important."

Great books have eternal youth.

I re-read Stendhal's La Chartreuse de Parme (his last novel), and found it amazingly, fascinatingly modern.

Stendhal knew that he was ~~was~~ writing for future generations: in his own time only "the happy few" were able to understand him. He might be pleased to watch an American soldier, in a tent somewhere in Italy, more than a century after his death, passionately absorbed in the ravishing inventions, the swiftly moving plot, the lucid, penetrating psychology of his Italian novel.

In Stendhal's narrative prose -- much in contrast to Voltaire's didactic-ironical style --, there seems to be hardly any reflexion -- just motion and emotion, passion and plot, rapid dialogue, bold and beautiful gestures. All the characters in La Chartreuse ~~seem~~ act impelled, as it were, by ardent, irresistible ^{impulses} ~~feelings~~. The young hero, Fabrice Del Dongo, is something like an elementary power -- a graceful

incarnation of rampant energies. Count Mosca -- his paternal friend; the lover of Fabrice's aunt, who is in love with her nephew -- has the feline grandeur and dangerous alertness of a renaissance condottiere. The ladies at the little court of Parma seem to be more brilliant and more attractive than the women in contemporary novels or contemporary life.

To read La Chartreuse de Parme is an excursion into a spirited and chivalrous world -- a world of ardent romances, intrigues, adventures, crimes, and sacrifices. What makes the contact with this sphere so tonic and refreshing is the complete absence of vulgarity: there is not one shade of meanness or pettiness in Stendhal's character or in the characters created by him; there are no traces of cheap sentimentality or melodramatic exaggeration in his concise, elegant, virile prose. If Balzac's novels have the sweeping force of a young democratic society, Stendhal's disciplined style is consciously, proudly aristocratic. Not that the author of Le Rouge et le Noir is snobbish in the strangely obsolete sense of Marcel Proust or Henry James; his conception of aristocratic values is rather akin to Nietzsche's -- who, incidentally, admired Stendhal more than any other author of the Nineteenth Century.

As for La Chartreuse in particular, as competent a critic as André Gide considers it, not only Stendhal's masterpiece, but the greatest novel ever written in French -- a verdict to which I subscribe after having enjoyed once more (and under rather trying circumstances!) this literary miracle of psychological insight and creative imagination.

If Voltaire -- not the crusader but the skeptic -- reminded me of the fact that it doesn't pay to take the antics and follies of

human life too seriously, Stendhal's splendid vision of human beauty and passion reassures me that there is no reason to be ashamed of belonging to the human race. The world he portrays is at once highly civilized and enchantingly naive; it possesses both refinement and vitality. It is a world worth to live in -- indeed, even worth to fight for...