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The Function of the Writer in the Present Crisis.

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The Function of the Writer in the Present Crisis.

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trashy mystery stories, is characteristic, not of the author's present state of mind, but of the public's. And the very day when the "Saturday Evening Post" introduces a pilot of the Royal Air Force as the dashing juvenile who obliges the daughter of an American missionary in Abyssinia by protecting her against the insults of a fascist brute, we may be sure that the United States have cast their lot definitely ~~on the side of~~ along with Britain's.

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Needless to say that all these different types - the harmless hack, the pretentious propagandist and the truly creative spirit - sometimes overlap or are insolubly intermingled in the character of one single individual. Yet, we have to stick to our simplifying scheme and, therefore, repeat, that it is exclusively the creative artist we have in mind when ~~referring~~ ^{when} employing here the term "writer."

Unfortunately, the matter remains involved, even ~~is~~ ^{when} simplified as much as possible. For, when speaking of "the creative artist", we ought to differentiate at least between ~~the~~ two basic types and patterns: on the one hand, the poet or narrator who is primarily concerned with

producing something beautiful - a story or a poem that gives a truthful, colourful picture of ~~the~~ human life and the world and, at the same time, expresses the author's own personal suffering or enthusiasm; - on the other hand, the teacher who has something he wants other people to think and to say - the prophet who anticipates and promotes certain developments. Here, once more, we must add that the two archi-types - the revolutionary prophet and the contemplative or lyrical observer - are frequently combined in the same person. In certain cases it is strikingly obvious that the writer or poet in question belongs to the one group or to the other. The author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin", for instance, is to be easily recognized as an agent and promotor of certain humanitarian ideas - not as a detached observer. It is also self-evident that Edgar Allan Poe had no program - that he did not care to convince his readers of anything. He wanted to frighten or to delight them - simply by revealing the drama of his own life and by transforming his nightmares into cleverly constructed detective stories or enchanting fairy-tales. But how about Charles Dickens? He is more comprehensive: his character and work embrace both the superior detachment of the artist who watches and portrays life - and the revolutionary pedagogue who wants to change life, to reform and to improve its conditions.

Has Shakespeare any "pedagogical message"? - except the one to show the infinite greatness and complexity of the human tragedy and the human farce. How would he have reacted to the crisis we are now passing through? . . .

~~the intricate and ambiguous nature of that particular crisis.~~
For, in 1813, even the most brutal Germanic jingoism was somehow
impregnated with a truly democratic flavour - foreshadowing the
progressive impetus of 1848 and, at the same time, the diabolic
outrages of 1933 and 1940. Goethe was fully aware of this dark
and dangerous mixture; hence his apprehension, his disgust, his
~~silence.~~

The crisis we have to face, in 1941, is undoubtedly ^{even} more dang=
erous and may have more far-reaching consequences than any
~~single event in the XIX th. Century - indeed, than any~~ historical
emergency since the end of the Roman Empire.

We have to grasp, soberly and precisely, the scope and fatal
impact of this vast tribulation, before venturing on a discussion
of what the writer should or could perform with regard to such
colossal happenings.

The terrific novelty of the present crisis is ~~that~~, in my opinion,
that it involves and threatens, not only certain aspects of
our civilization, but the basic structure and tradition of every=
thing man has called "civilization" for three-thousand years.

True, it has happened before that the civilized world was
confronted with the deadly challenge of barbarism: Athens was
menaced by the Persians, Rome - by the Vandals, the Christian
culture of the Middle Ages by the Huns and Turks. But in all these
instances the inimical forces invaded the realm of civilization
from without - a savage tribulation and appalling challenge to
the cultural developments within. This time, however, in this
year of 1941, the mortal enemy rises from the very heart of the

civilized world itself - equipped with tremendous microphones,poisoned gas,stream-lined tanks,changeable propaganda-solngans,brandnew movie cameras and the appetite of a tiger.

What we have to emphasize and to repeat,over and over again,is this: that the present war does not represent a collision between two anta=gonistic schemes of civilization,with one side being more discrimina=ting in the choice of their methods than the other. The ~~the~~ Nazis must not be confounded with those who accept ugly means for the sake of inspiring ends,as did the Jesuits,the French Jacobins or the Russian terrorists. In the case of the Nazis,there are no moral standards that could be sacrificied,nor is there any goal to justify such an offe=ring. - - There is,indeed,no incongruity between the aims of the Nazis and the methods they employ in pursuing them - for the simple reason that there are no aims. Destruction can hardly be called an "aim" :it is the consequence of an aimless furor.

The Revolution of Nihilism is not an attempt to reform or to transform our civilization; it is,by definition,an attempt to annihilate it.

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Obviov~~ously~~sly,this a type of crisis - sweeping and catastrophic enough to reach and to move even the most protected Ivory Tower. In fact, if there is any particular type of man,any special profession hated ~~by the Nazis with~~ even and persecuted by the Nazis even more relent=lessly than they hate and persecute the human race in general - : then it is,indeed,the type of man we usually call "the intellectual" and the profession known as that of a "writer."

An aeverage citizen - a dentist,ingeneer,or salesman - may hope

- erroneously, to be sure! - that he may come to bearable terms with the totalitarian dictatorship. 'After all' - such plain people might be inclined to say - , 'why should I not go on fixing teeth, driving a motor, selling stockings or candies - no matter what sort of a government it is to which I owe my safety - and my taxes...

- Even painters or musicians may fool themselves - thinking that no dictator could possibly be disturbed by ~~their~~ the still-lives or the symphonies they produce. But a writer has no right to fool himself. For, in fooling himself, he also fools the others. In his particular case, ^{the} lack of clarity and determination is not only a shortcoming or a mistake: it actually amounts to a crime.

It is, indeed, the intrinsic mission of a writer - or, to use a less grandiose expression, it is simply his job to be more sensitive, more vigilant, and more acute than the rank-and-file citizen has to be. The writer, in both his qualifications as an observer and a pedagogue, has the duty to recognize and to formulate the most dangerous and the most promising tendencies of his time, before an obtuse public realizes the essential meaning of certain inconspicuous signs, certain gradual changes. It has frequently occurred in history that writers have been instrumental in bringing about certain major events - merely by articulating the vague trends and blurred desires of their contemporaries. In fact, every revolution has been prepared for by intellectuals, often even by professional writers. Sometimes, ~~as~~ as in the case of the ~~see~~ French Revolution, the writers - Voltaire, Rousseau and so on - laid a theoretical basis and left the practical execution

to the politicians like Danton and Robespierre. In the Russian Revolution, on the other hand, the political leaders - Lenin, Trotzki, Lunatcharski, etc. - were themselves also writers.

The Fascist Revolution, with its conscious attack on the intellect, seems to be the one exception to this rule. Yet, even in the career of this openly anti-literary movement, which is National Socialism, literature played a certain rôle: I admit it only blushingly, as I belong to the guild of writers myself. Paradoxically enough, that notorious hostility to the intellect, which is now an essential part of the Nazi political programme, was started by the intellectuals himself. This is true, above all, for Germany, which produced figures like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who in their emphasis on the will and their attack on Christianity, undermined - almost unknowingly! - the foundations of occidental culture. The connection between tyranny and literature are even more obvious in Italy, where D'Annunzio and, after him, the so-called "Futurists" were the most frantic of Mussolini. / We have to differentiate, of course, between those corrupt and irresponsible intellectuals who sold their souls actually to the Devil - which is, to Fascism - and others, who were distorted and abused by their disciples. Needless to say that Nietzsche or Richard Wagner would be horrified, if they were in a position to watch what Dr. Göbbels does to their ideas and their vocabulary. Yet, it is undeniable that - if there is any consistency in the Nazi viewpoint - you can trace it back from Göbbels to Rosenberg, from Rosenberg - to Spengler, from Spengler to Nietzsche and certain earlier romanticists.

However, the fact that ~~a~~ certain writers and philosophers are partly and indirectly responsible - whether on purpose or not! - for the present disaster, is one reason more to make them participate, actively and firmly, in a ~~spiritual~~ general effort of self-defense, that must eventually develop into a counter-attack.

The term "self-defense" seems, by the way, especially appropriate to describe the attitude of a writer, who tries to warn his fellow-citizens against the imminent dangers of Nazism and to re-affirm certain intrinsic concepts of the democratic creed. What side should a writer take - if not the side of freedom and civilization? Under the dictatorship of a boisterous fool he is doomed - immediately and completely. It is not by chance that the vast majority of all German writers of any significance went into exile without hesitation, when Hitler came to power, - even before the Jewish bankers or the officials of the Social Democratic Party thought of exile. They left, because they realized that Nazi dictatorship and culture are two incompatible notions. No doubt, Herr Hitler hates an independent German writer even more than ^{he hates} Winston Churchill and Dorothy Thompson combined. Those who remained in the Reich and tried to make their peace with the ruling party, made the most depressing experiences. They had to find out that this indescribable régime & profoundly distrusts any one, who may be - at least theoretically and according to his natural capacities - in a position to describe the crimes, the looks and the vices of those ghastly rulers. Ignorant people are usually suspicious of other people who happen to be a little less ignorant than they are. Ignorant tyrants, therefore, have always been in the habit of killing writers, who dare to criticize them - which is undoubtedly the most

convenient method of refuting their seditious arguments...

But those who escape? who survive? or have never lived, thanks to the right of their birth, under the sway of stupid tyranny? What is their task? What are their chances?

What can a writer do, for his modest part, to defend the comparative Good against the absolute Evil?

They are many - and by no means the worst! - who can do nothing at all - simply because their grief and their disgust are such that it silences or literally kills them.

What, do you think, killed Ernest Toller, who took his own life in a New York hotel room? He cannot speak any more - nor can Virginia Woolf, that most delicate writer of contemporary English literature. She disappeared, only some weeks ago; and then her frail body was recovered from a river near her home. However, she left a note - a note for her husband, that read:

I have a feeling I shall go mad. I cannot go on any longer in these terrible times. I hear voices and I cannot concentrate on my work.

I fought against it. I cannot fight any longer.

I cannot go on any longer in these terrible times... :That is the way they felt - many of the best writers, who committed suicide, in Vienna, in Prague, in Holland, Belgium, France...: ⁱⁿ ~~all~~ all the countries invaded by the barbarians. - - The eminent Czech writer Karel Capek died - a few days after the Führer had entered the golden city of Prague; the great philosopher Henri Bergson died - while the S.A.-troops paraded on the Place de la Concorde. James Joyce fled from Paris where he had lived so long but did not want to stay any longer, with the Swastika waving from the Arc de Triomphe. Penniless, almost blind he reached Switzerland, ~~where~~ as he wanted

to die in a country whose air is not yet poisoned with the lies of Nazi propagandists and the screams of Nazi victims.

■ Undoubtedly, it is one of the essential functions of Naziism to humiliate, silence, or murder the writers. But what is the function of the writers in ~~the~~ our desperate struggle against Naziism?

There is, of course, no all-bountiful answer to so intricate and involved a question. Everything depends on the circumstances involved - one of which is the particular character of the writer's talent. For we must take it for granted that every writer has the ~~capacity~~ capability of commenting - directly: in a journalistic fashion - on the daily events. A great poet or inspired playwright may do a very poor job ■ when he attempts to write editorials

- in which case he'd better stick to his original form of expression. - - On the other hand, it would be a mistake to think that a writer, who deals - openly and passionately - with the burning issues of this time, ^{Sherrwood's} condescends, necessarily, to the depths of journalism. "There shall be no Night" is a fine play and, at the same time, first-rate political propaganda; (or, rather, it is first-rate propaganda for our cause because it happens to be a good play.) - Novels like "For Whom the Bell Tolls" or "The Grapes of Wrath" are topical, in a direct and exciting sense; yet, those epic pictures of the political and social crisis possess also that lofty objectivity characteristic of all great narratives from Homer to Balzac and Tolstoi. - - - The recent verse by Edna St. Vincent Millay or certain creations by Archibald MacLeish have the sweeping eloquence and immediate appeal of high-class journalism. But it would be absurd to claim that all

poets ought to adapt themselves to this grandiose and somewhat simplifying pathos of these lyrical manifestos.

Not every author has the power of constructive thinking ~~and~~ - the bold intellectual vision, that makes H.G. Wells so imposing a figure in the midst of a general confusion and moral disintegration.

In other cases, a writer's contribution may be less conspicuous but ^{no} less important. The living example of a great personality - the conscientiousness and self-discipline, the integrity and fervour manifest in all his utterances, cannot but inspire and encourage those who are weary, sceptical and uncertain.

There is, indeed, no universal postulate-except this: that no responsible intellectual - no creative mind can afford or should try to escape the tremendous problems of this crucial hour. His is the right to choose the form of his contribution: he may cease writing poetry or novels and produce nothing but political manifestos; he may renounce literature altogether and become a pilot if he feels that only the matters military count while literature is a luxury for more peaceful times (a point of view, which one can discuss, but which I personally deem erroneous!) He may transform his warnings and his appeal in poetic images or may present them in an historical disguise; he may found a magazine with the purpose of collecting an American and international vanguard to discuss

the crucial topics of our time and keep alive the imperishable traditions of our culture; (this is, by the way, what a few friends and myself try to do at this moment...);

However, the notion of responsibility that ~~was~~ I have mentioned before, is to be the leading thought behind and beyond all our activities and statements. The feeling of our responsibility should make us at once proud and humble; cautious and daring, realistic and confident. The seriousness of this hour is great - is, indeed, overwhelming. The Swastika waving from ~~the~~ Mount Olympus - :Hitler approaching the Acropolis: what symbols could be more sinister ~~and~~, more frightening?!

The writer's task and function in the Present Crisis does not differ essentially from the task and function of any citizen - although his situation may be more delicate and involved. For he, the writer, has not only to live up to certain moral and political postulates, but ~~also~~ has also to formulate them! ~~not only must he have faith himself, but must also inspire it.~~ Economically as well as morally he is most painfully affected by the crisis; yet, it is his privilege and meaning to clarify the meaning of a drama from which he suffers himself.

Not only must he have faith but must also inspire it - as long as he has fortitude and strength enough to believe, to live and to write.

X

The Function of the Writer in the Present Crisis.

When you have to discuss a big and rather general theme - such as "The Function of the Writer in the Present Crisis" - there is always the danger that you plunge into a stream of vague and beautiful words: ^{highly} "The writer should...", - "The writer obviously must...", "The sacred ^{mission} task of the writer is..." And so forth. Impressive slogans and grandiose postulates of this kind are, of course, lavishly at our disposal. The trouble only is that they are all a bit trite and rather meaningless - unless we make a serious and honest effort to define, to limit and to clarify the notions we have to deal with.

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