

BOOK REVIEWS

In his Heidelberg lectures of 1848, Ludwig Feuerbach announced his principal aim: to change "the friends of God into friends of man, believers into thinkers, worshippers into workers . . . Christians, who on their own confession are half-animal and half-angel, into men—whole men." A new era in religious thought had begun. Theology, once the domain of believers, was now redefined as a secular humanism that would liberate religion from itself. And so, with Feuerbach as its exemplar, the modern tradition of serious atheism took root. Far from despising theology, the anti-theologians turned to it in deadly earnest and created a wholly novel tradition of secular-humanist scholarship.

In *The Politics at God's Funeral*, Michael Harrington places himself within this tradition of dissent. He is a self-styled atheist and "cultural Catholic," a "pious man of deep faith, but not in the supernatural." At the very outset, this provocative self-description poses an interesting question. The first serious atheists had their work cut out for them; there were Bibles to rewrite, traditions to invert, whole centuries of thought to enlist in the cause of liberation. But in the latter half of the twentieth century, when the most prominent theologians in the world are already, in Harrington's own apt phrase, "doing the work of Nietzsche in the name of Christ," what is left for an atheist theologian to do?

The answer, of course, is politics. Harrington's purpose is to explore "the political consequences of the disappearance of the Judeo-Christian God"—a disappearance which, in his view, cannot be understood apart from the machinations of "late capitalism." His exploration ranges over two centuries of obituaries for the dying God: from the German metaphysicians, who cast Him out in the name of idealism, to the theologians of today, who report the latest non-sighting of the *deus absconditus*. The discussion is exhilarating and frustrating by turns, for Michael Harrington, atheist and Marxist, writes with all the irony and outrage of the consummate apostate Catholic. Thus the eighth chapter of his book, "God's Christian Burial," is perhaps the most incisive and scathing treatment to date of certain custodians of Christian orthodoxy—those who responded to modernity by

THE POLITICS AT GOD'S FUNERAL: THE SPIRITUAL CRISIS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION Michael Harrington / Holt, Rinehart & Winston \$16.95

Mary Tedeschi

capitulating to it. There is much here to warm the hearts (and fuel the prejudices) of those who still harbor misgivings about Protestant existentialism and Vatican II. There is much that is convincing elsewhere as well; Harrington's ringing indictment of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, whose contempt for religion was equalled only by their cynical toleration of the believing masses, is a case in point.

Still, a question nags the reader throughout this rich account of the Western spiritual condition: Why has Michael Harrington, atheist and Marxist, labored so long over the history of a quintessential illusion? The answer, like his argument throughout, is deceptively simple. Late capitalism, having done so much to destroy the spiritual fabric of Western society, has created a common enemy: "the humdrum nihilism of everyday life." This crisis, Harrington asserts, calls for a united front of believers and serious atheists; they must commit themselves to a "common transcendental which is

neither supernatural nor anti-supernatural." As for the proper politics of this united front, Harrington concludes by reciting the principles, "threadbare from misuse," of democratic socialism.

It is a deceptively simple argument because Harrington's premises, speculative at best, are also contentious—when, indeed, they are not contradicted by the facts. Consider his treatment of the claim, so central to the project of this book, that religiosity is declining in the West. It is a familiar lament—or was, until evidence mounted of the American fundamentalist revival. Harrington acknowledges this revival, but insists that the overall decline in religiosity "is corroborated, not contradicted, by the recent arrival of a fundamentalism whose desperate orthodoxy tries to will the departing deity back into existence." This is not the reasoning of a sociologist; it is jesuitical. He also

cites the fact that Moral Majority candidates did rather poorly in the congressional elections of 1982. Here, Harrington misses the point completely. As Marx himself argued against Bruno Bauer, it is the very separation of church and state which allows American society to be the most religious in the world.

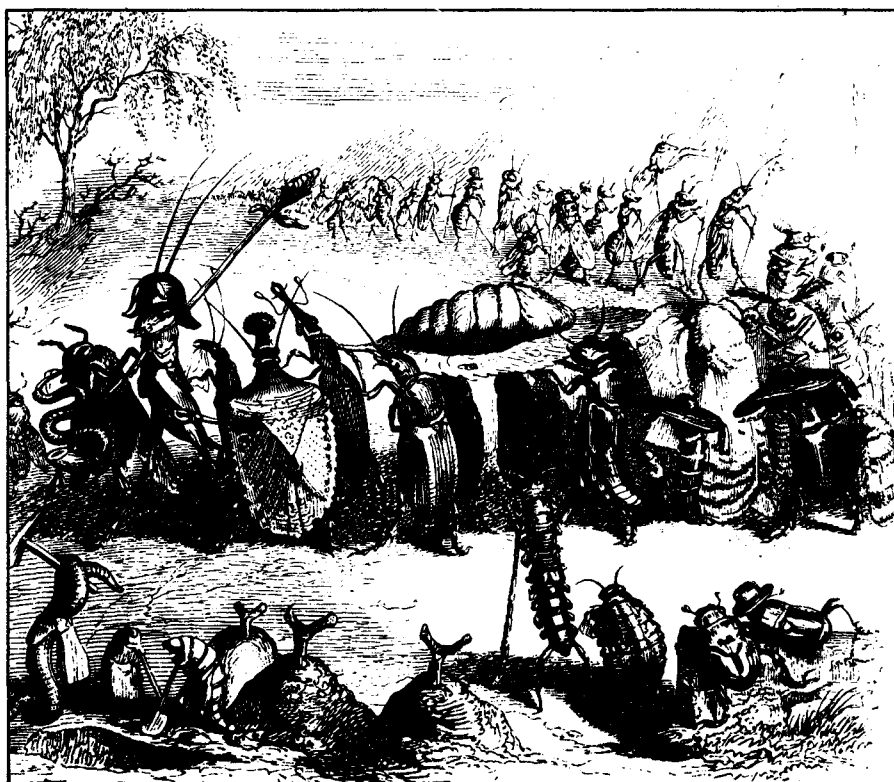
Harrington's case for the steady erosion of religiosity becomes weaker still if we consider—as he does not—the condition of the Church elsewhere in the West. It is true that liberation theology, itself an example of diluted (if not decaying) belief, has attracted a following throughout Central America and Brazil. Less well-known, however, is the simultaneous appearance of *religiosidad popular*, an anti-political and anti-intellectual devotional movement now found throughout Latin America. As Paul Johnson notes in his recent book, *Modern Times*:

While theologians at the Universities of Tübingen and Utrecht were diminishing the total of Christian belief, strange charismatics in the slums of Mexico City and San Paulo, of Recife and Rio . . . were adding to it. The first group spoke for thousands; the second for scores of millions.

By these appearances, at least, religion—even in industrialized parts of the West—is surviving the best efforts of its prominent spokesmen.

Of course, Harrington's argument is not simply empirical. Its more speculative component, equally familiar, is that capitalism—in particular "late capitalism"—is hurrying along the decline. "Late capitalism" is defined only once in 308 pages; it is capitalism "increasingly run by the visible hand of the state." If, as Harrington asserts (he produces no evidence for this), "late" or state-run capitalism is the culprit, then why not vigorously affirm capitalism *simpliciter*? Or why not argue, as does Michael Novak in *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, that a free market economy, conjoined with democracy, has proved the only system in the world which safeguards religion itself? Michael Harrington cannot answer these questions, for he has not really told us what "late capitalism" is. And if he did, we may be sure, his politics would lead him off the path of reason and into the poppy fields of Marxist taxonomy.

It is sad to see debate so quickly foreclosed. It is sadder still that Harrington, in his earnest call for a united



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front, is blind to the most obvious fact of all: No modern ideology has proved so systematically hostile to religion as Marxism itself. Harrington tries to avoid this problem with an appeal to the "real" Marx of humanism and toleration. It is an ideological mantra, the favorite of Marxists everywhere. There is no point in entering the sectarian debate; the "other" Marx has had his theoreticians and his day. In the end, Harrington must be called to

account for his own desperate "orthodoxy." He is, as Hans Ehrenberg once said of Feuerbach, "a true child of his century": a "non-knower" (*Nichtkenner*) of death, and a "misknower" (*Verkenner*) of evil. Most of the religious lambs who lay willingly with Marxist lions have long since been devoured. Their numbers make a bitter mockery of any call, however well-intentioned, for future coalitions of this sort. □

WRITERS IN RUSSIA: 1917-1978

Max Hayward, edited and introduced by Patricia Blake
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich / \$22.95

Herb Greer

The nerves of Russia are uncommonly important to us, and so are her social nuts and bolts, so far as we can spy them out across a wide linguistic and political abyss. It follows that the products of Russian writers have a special interest for the West. When a man comes along with the singular talent for opening this difficult field to us he deserves the most generous praise, and his work ought to be handled with the greatest care. In this book there is a little less care than praise. With its generous preface by Leonard Schapiro and a long, affectionate introduction by Patricia Blake, *Writers in Russia: 1917-1978* seems at first not so much a monument of scholarship as a sort of literary dolmen or cairn to Max Hayward himself.

By these accounts he was a formidable eccentric in the British tradition: a marvelous if erratic companion, brilliantly talented, something of a drunk and a depressive, and a tremendous amateur in the best sense of the word, with all his heart in his work, though lacking the careerist flair for slotting into a corporate environment. His great love was languages, of which he knew several. Among these Russian took pride of place, and with it he developed his superb gift for translation. He gave us the English versions of Nadezhda Mandelstam's great memoirs, *Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*; through him we know Olga Ivinskaya's *A Captive of Time: My Years with Pasternak*. He was the co-translator of *Doctor Zhivago* (in which the character of Lara was based on Ivinskaya) and of

Herb Greer is an American writer and playwright living in Europe.

Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Working with others he also provided versions of writing by Mayakovsky, Isaac Babel, Yevgeny Schwartz and (among others) later authors like Andrei Amalrik and Andrei Sinyavsky.

This book is deceptively titled. It is not a long and systematic essay on twentieth-century Russian literature but a set of prefaces to other people's work. This is not to say that the material is thin or trivial; but there is an occasional oddity which appears to be the result of haste or carelessness, e.g., the opening chapter's assertion that the Russian Empire passed away with the Romanovs. In general, however, these relatively short pieces are full of the sort of detailed discussion that comes only from a man who knows his stuff. Above all they offer a good deal of useful background to the one aspect of Russian literature which colors its appearance in the West: the peculiar relationship between writers and the political fabric of society. As Hayward shows, this is not exclusive to the Communist scheme of things, but goes well back into tsarist times, at least as far as Pushkin.

Possibly our greatest problem in dealing with Russian writers is a residue of cliché which clings to the Western perception of Russians and their culture. Hayward himself is not always free of this. In the middle of his account of the Russian (nineteenth century) Empire, one stumbles across:

The most impressive testimony to the collective genius of the peasantry is the Russian language itself. None other—not even the closely related Slavic languages

—can match it in its breathtaking resourcefulness.

This type of special pleading is understandable in a man who has spent far more time inside books than among Russian peasants. Even so, Hayward might have seen that such a proposition—aside from its flimsiness on *prima facie* grounds (collective genius?)—is a stale dreg of the mystical rhetoric found in certain Russian writers of the last century, and not rare in this one. In America it was vulgarized into the image of the half-savage Russian with *soul*, so well known in the show business, popular songs, and jokes of the 1930s and 1940s. Standing outside it, Hayward might have pointed to this type of guff as a necessary reminder that we are still encumbered by a popular cartoon of the Russians as whiskered or lantern-jawed barbarians using stolen technology, the natives of a semi-Asiatic world quite apart from our own. This is not a nitty, minor point. It can help to explain, for instance, why the liquidation of tens of millions of Russians carries less emotional impact in the West than the murder of six million Jews by Middle European Germans. Feeling that life among Asiatic barbarians is cheap, the cliché-prone Westerner can hate Hitler with a virulence that does not extend to the late and bloodthirsty dictator of Russia and his system. After all, Hitler's victims were mostly from among our sort; indeed Hitler himself was one of us, and so hideously offensive in a way that Stalin was not and is not felt to be. Thus it becomes easier for

apparently sane people to excuse Stalin and even to praise him.

Another prejudice or bromide has been heavily reinforced by Western media treatment of dissenters and writers such as Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn. This casts Russia as a fundamentally unstable society, seething with popular discontent and held together only by the ruthless

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