

BOOKS

“A Condition of Mere Nature”

“INTERNATIONAL Relations” as an academic discipline, Professor Arnold Wolfers of Yale notes in introducing a curious anthology,* was born of the idealism of World War One, and particularly of the fervour for a League of Nations that would encompass the family of man in a happy communion. This idealism was itself a union of two incompatible blood-types: on the one hand, a humanist universalism that verged on the utopian; on the other, a doctrinaire liberalism that celebrated the natural right to self-determination, nationhood, sovereignty, and similar appetising things. These rights being asserted, they inevitably clashed, and instead of being in utopia we were back in a “condition of mere nature” (Hobbes) where man wars against every man; and the nations which made up the League began gobbling one another up.

It is not surprising, then, that “International Relations” was sickening from the start, and that it has passed most of its days in an iron lung, i.e. the university. There, it is fed with the leavings from History’s high table (“Rumanian-Bolivian Relations, 1877–1904”) and Sociology’s low one (“Psychological Tensions and International Concord in the Near East”), while trying to make itself more or less useful by tutoring young people in the ways and wiles of statesmen. What it has to teach is what a maiden aunt will tell her innocent young niece who is going off to live in the big city. Such advice, whether puritanical or prurient in tone, ought not to be lightly scorned; but it is of relatively little help when the lights go out, memory fails, and there is only strength of character and native cunning to fall back on.

In international affairs the lights are always going out, which is perhaps one of the reasons

this anthology makes such dim reading. Of what use is it to know that Sir Thomas More lists five kinds of just war in his *Utopia*—especially when they add up to nothing more than that a just war is one entered with clear conscience, and after prudent calculation? The pronouncements on foreign affairs of More, Bacon, Locke, Godwin, Burke, Hamilton, *et al* are important clues for any analysis of their political philosophies. But aside from exposing students to good prose and fine minds, and supplying journalists with a convenient stock of quotations (both good things in themselves, to be sure), the fragments in this book can offer little knowledge about, or insight into, foreign affairs. Selections from diplomatic memoirs would have been far more to the point. For these political philosophers were, in foreign affairs, as much the sport of circumstance, as much bound over to Necessity, as the sovereigns and statesmen they presumed to advise. Their generalisations are generalities, the commonplaces of worldly wisdom; while they do not provide us with any specific analyses of concrete, temporal problems from which one might learn, if only obliquely and analogically, how to get along and ahead.

IS THERE, moreover, a definable Anglo-American tradition in foreign affairs, as the title of this book claims? No one had ever noticed it up to now, and it is most improbable that it had been simply overlooked. It is true that, on the whole, English and American thinkers on politics have been slightly less “machiavellian” and more moralistic in their style of thought than their European counterparts. But, as Professor Wolfers himself points out, this was the result of the geographical insularity of the English-speaking peoples, which endowed them with a greater range of choice in their actions. Even the most “machiavellian” of Continental thinkers (including Machiavelli himself) allowed that geographical luck was one way of escaping from the iron laws of policy they laid down. And in any case, this accident

* *The Anglo-American Tradition in Foreign Affairs*. Readings from Thomas More to Woodrow Wilson. Edited with an introduction and commentary by ARNOLD WOLFERS and LAWRENCE W. MARTIN. Yale University Press. London: Cumberlege. 36s.

of geography has long since been cancelled out by other accidents of technology. The basic fact is that we are all "machievellians" when it comes to foreign affairs, and have been so since the dawn of the modern era. Nor was this a matter either of original sin or spiritual deviation. When states exist in a condition of mere nature, there is no alternative available to us.

Medieval Christendom assumed that all men (Christian men, anyway) were members of one community, and that this community was under the judgment, not only of a common God, but of a common law as well. But the medieval ideal was doomed to defeat since (1) most of the world wasn't Christian, (2) nor were most of the Christians. With the "revival of learning" and the rise of secular monarchies—these being but two aspects of the same great transformation—the state of nature was frankly acknowledged as natural for nations, if not for men; so natural, that medieval thought was dismissed *in toto* as clerical hypocrisy (which, in all fairness, it was only in part).

Once the idea of a unified Christendom was discarded, however, we were back with the Greeks and Romans in a situation where all that could be said about foreign affairs in general had already been said in the Iliad:

*And perhaps one day in Argos you will weave
cloth for another,
And the Messeian or Hyperian water you will
fetch
Much against your will, yielding to harsh
necessity.*

What could political philosophers, as philosophers, add to this? They might indulge in utopian daydreams; or they might try to make, not only a virtue out of necessity, but a philosophy as well. Most, aiming to be useful, chose to do the latter. So Francis Bacon, having reproached the older scholastic philosophers with being "fitter to guide penknives than swords," urged philosophers in matters politic to kneel before Necessity, which he humbly saluted as "the great god of the powerful." At about the same time, the Catholic casuist, Molina, was establishing the modern Church doctrine (as against St. Thomas) that war could be just on *both* sides, when the two parties were persuaded of the "probability" of their rightness. This line of thought quickly leads to a philosophical dead end; which is why practically all modern political philosophers, whatever the richness and profundity of their thought, have been transformed into more or less clever, more or less wise, casuists and pamphleteers when it comes to foreign affairs. Where choice is entirely dictated by the contingency of events, where ideals must always give way before the struggle to survive,

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moral questions are converted into problems of expediency: what one ought to do becomes identical with what one had better do under the circumstances. One would have thought that to eliminate the distinction between expedience and righteousness was an activity hardly in need of philosophers; but their voluntary work was, naturally enough, much appreciated in the highest quarters.

Nevertheless, despite the joint efforts of political philosophers and politicians, there seems to be an irrepressible sentiment, a kind of indefinite but ineradicable nostalgia, which forbids us to accept the "condition of mere nature" as being

what nature really intended. And, after all, might not Hobbes' myth of the origin of a pacifying sovereignty, which reconciled the claims of men and redeemed them from a state of perpetual war, apply literally to the future of nations? Under the shadow of mutual extermination, the antagonists will be seized with fear for their lives, overcome their vanity and shame, and recognise that they have a common enemy: death. Then and only then will it be possible to disentangle political philosophy from the bondage of political necessity. Leviathan will still exist; he will still demand sacrifices; but we shall have ceased to idolise him.

Irving Kristol

A SMALL GREEN INSECT SHELTERS IN THE BOWELS OF MY QUIVERING TYPEWRITER

Nobody who has read the correspondence columns of the English literary periodicals over the past three or four years can possibly be unaware that we are in the presence of an impalpable and ambiguous phenomenon generally referred to as "The Movement," whose existence is affirmed and disavowed—sometimes in consecutive sentences—by its adherents, victims, and bandwagon-masters. It all began, so far as I remember, with some young provincial dons exclaiming at the iniquity of the London literary racket in the tone of awed horror that Sunday papers adopt in those articles they have about the razor gangs and street women of Soho. Almost simultaneously—at the drop, as it were, of a cocktail glass—the voices of these same young were heard wafted on Third Programmes, their verse and opinions presented weekly on Fridays and Sundays in the booksy periodicals and newspapers, while the London critics mustered their most impressive jargon to inform the nation in leading articles that a poetic renaissance unparalleled since the thirties was at hand. A brace of novels was greeted with wild cheering and references to Tobias Smollett. In no time whatsoever the London literary racket, if it ever existed, was bust wide open. There hadn't been anything like it since Mr. Deeds came to town.

Time has passed and it is perhaps possible as well as permissible now to begin to assess the Movement's achievement in the field of contemporary verse. I propose to review—*en lump* so to speak—the four individual books of poems I have before me, plus Mr. Robert Conquest's anthology of nine poets,* all by writers belong-

ing, or considered to belong, to the new dispensation. As to what this may be, I refer to Mr. Conquest's introduction to his anthology: "The most important general point would be that it submits to no great systems of theoretical constructs nor agglomerations of unconscious commands." Um.

IT MIGHT be easy to make fun of this kind of pomposity and of the prose that sustains it—the sort of prose which George Orwell (the late espoused saint of the new writers on account of his "principle of real, rather than ideological, honesty") damned. But it is necessary to follow Mr. Conquest's argument. According to him, the poetry typical of the last decade or two (or maybe three, for Mr. Conquest is a little difficult to pin down) was "an arrangement of images of sex and violence tapped straight from the unconscious (a sort of upper-middlebrow equivalent of the horror-comic)" when it was not evoking "without comment, the *naïvetés* and nostalgias of childhood." (This seems a quite fair description of some of the worst verse of the forties.) "To combat this trend," Mr. Conquest goes on,

* *The Less Deceived*. By PHILIP LARKIN. The Marvell Press. 6s.

Brides of Reason. By DONALD DAVIE. Fantasy Press.

A Word Carved on a Sill. By JOHN WAIN. Routledge and Kegan Paul. 10s. 6d.

Bread Rather than Blossoms. By D. J. ENRIGHT. Secker and Warburg. 10s. 6d.

New Lines. An Anthology edited by ROBERT CONQUEST. Macmillan. 12s. 6d.