

THE REAL OUTCOME—however impressive the sheer quantitative output, and very occasionally the quality of insight into certain predicaments of 19th-century European society—must be counted among the major *débâcles* of the Hitler-Stalin era: an intellectual catastrophe no less real because its effects are impalpable, and because it relates to a dimension which society has increasingly relegated to the margin of existence. Instead of a genuine critique of modernity in its all forms (including its “ideological reflex” in literary modernism), he has produced a vast corpus of dogmatic writing attuned to a simplified dualism which is already out of date, and which systematically eludes the pressing problems of industrial mass culture in East and West alike; instead of authentic dialectical Marxism, there is blind commitment to the simplified Leninist version; instead of genuine controversy, the stereotyped language of the Cold War. At the age of 78, and after almost sixty years of intensive and far-ranging activity, Georg Lukacs has not merely failed to write the Marxist aesthetics his admirers expected from him: he has failed altogether as a responsible writer, and ultimately as a man. It is one of the worst intellectual disasters of this disastrous age.

Kazin's Contemporaries

Contemporaries. BY ALFRED KAZIN. *Secker & Warburg*, 42s.

“I LIKE CRITICISM to be as serious as possible in content, but as personal and idiosyncratic in style as possible—thus reversing the usual academic recipe of the trivial point and the heavy style.” Thus Alfred Kazin, somewhat heavily. But the point is anything but trivial, at a time when the presses disgorge an unprecedented number of critical works which nobody wants to read and which, as often as not, nobody really wanted to write. Mr. Kazin has always stood firm against the high priests of PhDeism, and it is in this context that one must read his constant appeals for spontaneity, for a personal style, for life, great dollops of it. What might otherwise sound self-evident can seem positively refreshing if one comes to it after an hour or two spent burrowing through the dustier academic quarterlies. Mr. Kazin pines for an older, less constrained, more talkative world of literary cafés, pamphlet warfare, recklessly discursive amateurs: “feuilleton” is a magic word for him. A fanciful picture, no doubt; it's all very well to take comfort in the fact that a

Chekhov could cheerfully dash off ephemeral sketches for light-weight magazines, while conveniently forgetting the rank and file, all those morose Gissing characters with sunken cheeks and frayed cuffs stumbling wearily from deadline to deadline. But Mr. Kazin's prejudice is a healthy one. Good scholarship is its own justification, and another matter; but good criticism tends to get written in the heat of the moment. Most of our current rigorous reappraisals or laborious works of elucidation—elucidation *a non lucendo*—are neither one thing nor the other.

Contemporaries is a fat collection of over seventy recent articles: reviews, essays, travel-pieces, introductions to other people's books. The scope of the book is wider than the title suggests: the authors discussed range from Emerson to Sholom Aleichem, from Stendhal to Dylan Thomas. Mr. Kazin is, I think, an excellent literary journalist: nimble, energetic, humane. He would rather get the best out of an author than get the better of him; his aim is to enlarge and exhilarate, and when he dislikes a book he manages to say so without doubling up in paroxysms of rage. Coming across them in magazines, I have enjoyed and been stirred by many of the pieces which he reprints. Yet, though it must sound churlish to say so, the book as a whole left me dissatisfied, a bit despondent even. The table is set, and the banquet is spread out; but confronted with six dozen courses all at once, the guest suddenly finds that he has lost his appetite.

I doubt whether Mr. Kazin has done himself much good by gathering up quite so many fugitives. After all, one reads a book (or should, ideally) more slowly and reflectively than an article, with stiffer demands and greater concentration. There are plenty of striking phrases and fresh insights in *Contemporaries*; but there are also too many awkward attempts to be sprightly—

We were wrong when we thought that the ghost of Henry James had put his too, too careful hand on our young 'uns. . .

too much tired writing—

It is almost nineteen years since a GPU agent put a pick-axe into the brain of Leon Trotsky, and during that period Trotsky's interest for everyone has certainly diminished. . .

too many flat little verdicts which come shooting out like tickets from an Underground machine. Mr. Kazin can highlight Robert Lowell's virtues or give Leslie Fiedler six of the best as well as the next man; but when he has a chance to wind his way into a subject, as he does here with a longish essay on *Moby Dick*, he makes one wish

that now and again he'd let the next man take over the smaller jobs.

If you deal in perishable goods, it's as well to face the fact that they *are* perishable. Yet the best writers manage to have it both ways. Most of the critical works to which I find myself returning are made up of essays which first saw the light in periodicals. Perhaps I'm saying no more than that Kazin, gifted as he is, ultimately lacks the originality and distinction of an Orwell, a Pritchett, a Trilling. But there is something else missing: a compulsive central theme, a fixed view of men and books. Mr. Kazin lends his assent to an author or an idea, but never actually gives it; you always feel that he wants it back, so that he can hurry on to his next review. His final appeal is almost invariably to "life"—not for nothing, going to Russia for the first time, did he imagine that he had been there in a previous existence. Life is a beautiful, inexhaustible word, and we all believe in it, but I think that it should be used sparingly as a rallying cry, if we're not to find ourselves left in mid-air.

No one is more aware of this absence of focus than Kazin himself, and it is to his credit that he has remained an honest fox, instead of trying to turn himself into an artificial hedgehog. Still, one can be too foxy; the best never lack *all* con-

viction, and there is an open-mindedness which springs from tired acquiescence, from a feeling that there are no more battles to be fought. Mr. Kazin, much-travelled man that he is, can sometimes sound very parochial:

Before the hardening pattern of our society set in for good with World War II, men still hoped to change our society, not to escape it.

He is writing about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and there is a sense, I suppose, in which Hitler and Hiroshima have once and for all made the older, romantic, change-of-heart social philosophies look too dangerous, even to sympathisers. But does the sentence which I have quoted really do much more than reflect a passing mood of conservatism and deadlock among American intellectuals during the Eisenhower era? Or perhaps no more than a change in the literary climate? It is one of Mr. Kazin's merits that he brings literature and history closer together; it is one of his weaknesses that he is prone to identify them with each other. When he writes that "as English schoolboys once learned history from Homer, so American undergraduates now learn it from Eliot and Hemingway and Faulkner," one is tempted to retort that they may be reading good literature, but that they are certainly learning bad history.



from the enthusiastic American reviews of

Africa for Beginners

'This is not a compendium, it is an aperitif: it is not a Baedeker, it is a Marco Polo . . . The feelings and reflections of a man who sees, seeks and thinks'—*Jacques Barzun*. 'There comes a time when all the experts in the world can't hold a candle to a sensible intelligent layman who can also write—and report. Melvin Lasky fills that bill splendidly . . . A genius at reporting the significant details. This is the most stimulating and readable account of contemporary Africa'—*San Francisco Chronicle*. 'One of the most exciting and informative books on things African yet to cross this desk'—*Negro Digest*. 'It has much more sense and realism in it than you will find in a dozen recent tomes . . . Irony, wit, and a very accurate picture'—*New York Courier*. 'Because he is free from both alarming pessimism and dreary optimism, has a lively, questing mind, and knew what questions to ask, his book is not only informative but fresh and steadily entertaining'—*New York Post*. 'Should delight the expert as well as the novice'—*Washington Star*.

a Traveller's Notebook by

MELVIN J. LASKY

Just published in London by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 16s



And the notion that social patterns have hardened irrevocably since 1945 would seem laughable in most parts of the world.

On the narrower question of shifting literary tastes, Mr. Kazin is more plausible. His burden is that the revolution has succeeded; yesterday's wild heresy is to-day's militant orthodoxy, and twenty years ago the rebels started turning into classics (or, as he himself puts it, "the Nobel prizes began to roll in"). The only trouble is that, with success, modernism has lost its tang. Mr. Kazin writes as one who was alive in that dawn when Scott and Zelda were jumping into fountains and the mere mention of Eliot or Joyce could raise a scowl in the English Department. Now, quite understandably, he bemoans the speed with which the past can be misunderstood. One of his best essays, written with a controlled anger which has the curious effect of producing an unaccustomed note of gaiety, is about Ezra Pound, and how the whole Pound issue has been sterilised and tidied up by professors so that the good grey poet is ready to take his place among the required reading for freshmen. Pound is an extreme case, but wherever he turns Mr. Kazin seems to see pioneers being parodied or misinterpreted. The new enemies are knowingness and false sophistication.

A melancholy view, with some truth in it and some exaggeration. Why worry so much about the din in the critical parrot-house? Fashions come and go, and in any case their reign is never absolute. One disadvantage of reviewing is that it makes anyone who does it regularly morbidly sensitive to the minute ups and downs of reputation, the slightest trembling of the needle towards Puff or Sneer. Mr. Kazin has been compelled to spend too much of his time sizing up and putting price-tags on "contemporaries"—not that he doesn't do it judiciously. But well before I'd finished reading *Contemporaries* I found myself longing, in a simple Eng. Lit. sort of way, for something that wasn't smart and up-to-date and in-the-swim: a few words on Addison and Steele, perhaps, or *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Although it must be said that when Mr. Kazin does deal with an English author, a contemporary like C. P. Snow or Raymond Williams, he sometimes slips out of touch with his subject-matter. His view of the English character is faintly reminiscent of the late Sir C. Aubrey Smith:

They size up men as coldly as a trainer examining horseflesh, yet their public manner is always careful, starched, externally "correct"—and this, too, is a strength.

Contemporaries is a miscellany, and no review could deal with every item in it without degenerating into a catalogue. Mr. Kazin writes

glowingly about Freud's heroic qualities, for instance, and discusses the Civil War in the tradition of his mentor, Edmund Wilson. Yet anyone who admires *On Native Grounds* or that eloquent memoir, *A Walker in the City*, must wish that, for his own sake, the literary editors would leave Mr. Kazin in peace for a year or two and let him get back to writing full-length books.

John Gross

The Politics of Science Fiction

Fail-Safe. By EUGENE BURDICK and HARVEY WHEELER. Hutchinson, 16s.

BY NOW, everyone who is *au courant* with best-sellers knows the theme of *Fail-Safe* by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler: A defective condenser in an "activation machine" that controls the American retaliatory bombing system sets off a nuclear attack against Moscow by a wing of six U.S. bombers. All efforts to recall or destroy them fail. Two get through. Moscow is demolished. To convince Khrushchev this was a genuine error and thus forestall all-out war, the President orders New York demolished.

As science fiction the book is not without merit. Its suspense is sustained and it presents a considerable amount of information, gleaned from civilian writings on thermonuclear war, that will convey to the unwary reader a semblance of plausibility. It is also better written than Peter Bryant's *Red Alert*, published in 1958, which, while based on a different type of accident, contains an amazing number of similar details, including the possible death swap of cities. (If Burdick and Wheeler do not owe a debt of acknowledgement to Bryant, the index of coincidental plot detail in science fiction must be high.)

But *Fail-Safe* is not merely a piece of science fiction. It is an emotionally surcharged political tract designed to prove that the greatest danger to the survival of free institutions in the world to-day is the Western defence system. In their preface, the authors seriously claim that they are not really writing fiction but are relating a "true" story; accidental nuclear war may not come as a result of a faulty condenser, but "ultimately it will occur." Or, as Burdick put it in an interview with Norman Cousins, an acci-