

Intellectuals & Politics

The Society of Man. By LOUIS J. HALLE.
Chatto & Windus, 25s.

THE SUBJECT of this book is a very old problem, the connection between theory and practice. The author takes a fresh look at it and comes out with some searching, lively, and original suggestions. The fact that he has been for more than twelve years an official of the State Department and for almost as long a professor of political science has clearly influenced his thinking, and lends a certain authority to his views. Dr. Halle would have liked, one suspects, to believe with Marx in the "unity of theory of practice," but experience as well as reflection has taught him that these two realms are worlds apart. Even so, he thinks there is an urgent need to bring them closer together by the right kind of mediation.

What he clearly considers to be the wrong kind of mediation is that envisaged by a long tradition in political philosophy, according to which the practical politician ought in the world of affairs to act out programmes that the theorist has thought up in his study. From Plato in Syracuse to Professor Harold Laski at Transport House, this kind of intellectual back-seat driver has seldom been a wholly welcome figure, and perhaps even less often a useful one. The task of mediation of which Dr. Halle speaks must be undertaken, he suggests, by another kind of man.

The misfortune of the intellectual, according to Dr. Halle, is his proneness to dwell in the "orderly conceptual world of thought" and to fancy that the "chaotic, existential world" either conforms or could be made to conform to the image that exists in the mind. Dr. Halle illustrates his argument with the case-histories of two 19th centuries which are still with us despite the way the world has changed, namely, Marxism and Nationalism. He sees Marx as a visionary who took his knowledge from books and brought forth a rational model of a just political order, the classless society, together with an account of the steps by which it would be actualised. Events in the external world have not confirmed these predictions. Yet Marx's followers have not been dismayed. The mind has many ways of resisting unwelcome facts. Lenin's effort to "bridge the gap between the

conceptual and the existential," as Dr. Halle puts it, was plainly the most audacious: having failed to rally a proletarian majority to enact the Marxist role of dictatorship, Lenin adopted the tactic of *calling* the minority he commanded the majority. This, says Dr. Halle, is "nominalism"; and it is of course the ancient trick of creating a wilderness and naming it peace. The trick works best with the educated; as Rousseau once said, the less sophisticated are the less easily deceived.

Nationalism has no single great prophet, but a multitude of minor ones. Dr. Halle argues (and I agree) that Nationalism has become an anachronism. It belongs to the age of declining dynasties, when the idea of a self-sufficient nation-wide state could be made to seem attractive. Now that Western Europe (the birthplace of Nationalism as an ideology) is becoming increasingly integrated, with people coming to think and even feel as Europeans, the main-spring of Nationalism, which is the will of people to be members of an independent sovereign state, is losing its drive. What remains is Afro-Asian nationalism, but this is but a shadow of the old ideology, more a form of anti-imperialism, the will to keep the old guard out rather than the will to exalt the state.

Nationalistic fervour has caused as much bloodshed in recent generations as religious fervour caused before the age of reason, and the ordinary man today is becoming as healthily suspicious of ideologues as were his ancestors of priests. What we can begin to hope for now, according to Dr. Halle, is for a kind of statesmanship which will mediate between the theoretical and the practical with the aim of making our "conceptual world" conform to the "existential world." Here he might seem to be placing himself on the side of Aristotle against Plato, but for the fact that he is somewhat against both when he puts his faith rather in the practical man, than the theorist, as mediator: "a formal education may, by exalting the conceptual above the existential, disqualify a man for mediation." But Dr. Halle is no pessimist. His book ends with the bracing suggestion that the "existential world" is moving by a process of "evolution" much faster than our theories are being modified, and that we may find ourselves living under a universal system which *no* theorist foresees.

Maurice Cranston

AUTHORS & CRITICS

Nabokov's Reply

IN REGARD to my novels my position is different. I cannot imagine myself writing a letter-to-the-editor in reply to an unfavourable review, let alone devoting almost a whole day to composing a magazine article of explanation, retaliation, and protest. I have waited at least thirty years to take notice—casual and amused notice—of some scurvy abuse I met with in my “V. Sirin” disguise but that pertains to bibliography. My inventions, my circles, my special islands are infinitely safe from exasperated readers. Nor have I ever yielded to the wild desire to thank a benevolent critic—or at least to express somehow my tender awareness of this or that friendly writer’s sympathy and understanding, which in some extraordinary way seem always to coincide with talent and originality, an interesting, though not quite inexplicable phenomenon.

If, however, adverse criticism happens to be directed not at those acts of fancy, but at such a matter-of-fact work of reference as my annotated translation of *Eugene Onegin* (hereafter referred to as *EO*), other considerations take over. Unlike my novels, *EO* possesses an ethical side, moral and human elements. It reflects the compiler’s honesty or dishonesty, skill or sloppiness. If told I am a bad poet, I smile; but if told I am a poor scholar, I reach for my heaviest dictionary.

I do not think I have received all the reviews that appeared after *EO* was published; I fail to locate a few that I was sure I had in my chaotic study; but judging by the numerous ones that did reach me, one might conclude that trying to translate an author literally represents an approach entirely devised by me; that it had

FROM TIME TO TIME in this department a writer is given an opportunity to reply polemically to his reviewers.

Vladimir Nabokov’s four-volume edition of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* was published by the Bollingen Foundation (New York) and Routledge (London). Among Mr. Nabokov’s novels are *Lolita* (1955), *Pale Fire* (1962), and *The Gift* (1963). There is also his critical study of Gogol (1947) and a volume of memoirs, *Speak Memory* (1951). He contributed a study on “Pushkin and Gannibal” to the July 1962 *ENCOUNTER*.

never been heard of before; and that there was something offensive and even sinister about such a method and undertaking. Promoters and producers of what Anthony Burgess calls “arty translations,” carefully rhymed, pleasantly modulated versions containing, say, eighteen per cent of sense plus thirty-two of nonsense and fifty of neutral padding, are I think more prudent than they realise. While ostensibly tempted by impossible dreams, they are subliminally impelled by a kind of self-preservation. The “arty translation” protects them by concealing and camouflaging ignorance or incomplete information or the fuzzy edge of limited knowledge. Stark literalism, on the other hand, would expose their fragile frame to unknown and incalculable perils.

IT IS QUITE NATURAL, then, that the solidly unionised professional paraphrast experiences a surge of dull hatred and fear, and in some cases real panic, when confronted with the possibility that a shift in fashion, or the influence of an adventurous publishing house, may suddenly remove from his head the cryptic rose-bush he carries or the maculated shield erected between him and the spectre of inexorable knowledge. As a result the canned music of rhymed versions is enthusiastically advertised, and accepted, and the sacrifice of textual precision applauded as something rather heroic, whereas only suspicion and bloodhounds await the gaunt, graceless literalist groping around in despair for the obscure word that would satisfy impassioned fidelity and accumulating in the process a wealth of information which only makes the advocates of pretty camouflage tremble or sneer.

These observations, although suggested by specific facts, should not be construed in a strictly *pro-domo-sua* sense. My *EO* falls short of the ideal crib. It is still not close enough and not ugly enough. In future editions I plan to deflowerise it still more drastically. I think I shall turn it entirely into utilitarian prose, with a still bumpier brand of English, rebarbative barricades of square brackets and tattered banners of reprobate words, in order to eliminate the last vestiges of bourgeois poesy and concession to rhythm. This is something to look forward to. For the moment, all I wish is merely to put on record my utter disgust with the general attitude, amoral and philistine, towards literalism.

IT IS INDEED wonderful how indifferent critics are to the amount of unwilful deceit going on in the translation trade. I recall once opening a copy of Bely’s *Petersburg* in English, and lighting upon a monumental howler in a