

State absolutism and the idea of progress there is a glaring contradiction, as there is between brute force and reason.

The truth of all this is perhaps that those of us living in the 20th century have, through all our wars and revolutions, touched the depths of social reality, that is, the destiny innate in the very fact of human society. Perhaps the truth is also that "happiness" cannot be the goal of the human community nor the purpose of civilised society. In democratic and socialist theory there is ambiguity about the connection between happiness and civilisation. What is the "alienation" we keep talking about but the sign and the effect of each man's subjection to the social imperative, to the ideal of "bonheur"?

INTELLECTUALS & POLITICS: Something quite unprecedented took place in Italy some time ago: an exchange of views on politics between a politician and an intellectual. In the columns of the Roman weekly *Espresso*, Ugo La Malfa and Alberto Moravia discussed the relative responsibility of "the Bourgeois-class" and of the Political class in the present highly unbalanced state of Italian society.

But there is *another* responsibility, belonging to *another* class. This seems a good opportunity to take a look at it: the responsibility of Intellectuals for the great confusion of ideas that reigns not only in Italy but all over Europe, and has reigned there for the past twenty years at least.

Nicola Chiaromonte

THE DAY WILL COME, and not very long from now, when the figure of Nicola Chiaromonte will stand out as one of the best and greatest Italians of our time. This sort of prediction, uttered only a few days after his death, will strike some people as rash rather than generous, or, worse than rash, gratuitous. It might seem that clear judgment has been clouded by the suddenness of loss or by a long habit of affection.

Other friends and acquaintances of Nicola Chiaromonte, even close and old ones, might perhaps react like one friend who remarked to me in this regard, "By 'figure', I suppose you mean the man as much as his thought, the character plus the work. . . . Now, Chiaromonte is one of those whose published work is very slight (two slender volumes in a lifetime), because their real work is their way of life. Chiaromonte expressed himself, in Socratic fashion, in his relations with others. That is a very rare and splendid way of behaving. But his memory will not long outlive the people who knew this wise man and learned from him."

The truth of the matter is that nine-tenths of what Chiaromonte wrote, scattered throughout European periodicals and American journals or simply in Italian manuscript, has never been collected in volume form, and some has never been printed at all. There are political writings, essays on art and philosophy, reasoned reflections, and simple letters to friends in at least three countries in languages that Chiaromonte handled with equal precision, a correspondence that was almost entirely one of profound commitment.

One reason that Chiaromonte published so few books was that he scorned writing as an activity that could be separated from life or considered apart from a fraternal rapport between real beings. When his writings are collected, in several volumes, it will be clear how intimately related they are to their author's journey through life—not to his private history but to what could be called the intimately public biography of a man who inhabited his time and thought about it always in the company of and

for others. Until that day comes, however, one should underscore some of Chiaromonte's concerns and ideas.

WHAT HE CONSIDERED the indispensable tie between human beings was friendship, in the sense of a solidarity of affection based on the true. He considered it essential not only to the life of the individual but also to civic life, in which this bond corresponds "to the sense of that reality which Aristotle termed 'philia'," the foundation of the social bond, the same reality which Leopardi called "the human company" and which Andrea Caffe liked to call by the name "society." It is appropriate that the name of Andrea Caffe (1887–1955) be mentioned. He was the man of whom Chiaromonte wrote: "To his friendship I owe the best influence that I may have acquired in the course of my life." And appropriate because Chiaromonte thought that the best form of knowledge and the highest sense of liberty are received directly from certain men and are transmitted directly to others.

Andrea Caffe and Gaetano Salvemini were Chiaromonte's two "great friends," one in France, the other in America. Chiaromonte's friendship with these two men long inspired his thought and action. And friendship with the young, which he cultivated with open-hearted constancy, was one of the pivots of his life. The bravest and most unexpected tribute on Chiaromonte's death came from one of his political adversaries, a young Italian friend, a revolutionary of the most intransigent kind. Even Chiaromonte's physical life ended under the sign of friendship. It seemed impossible to find him a burial place in Rome. In the end he was interred in the tomb where a friend, Felice Balbo, had been buried years before.

FOR MANY YEARS Chiaromonte devoted his greatest energies to *Tempo Presente*, an intellectual review, to the best of my knowledge, without precedent in Italy and, unfortunately, with no successor as yet. Many people have had occasion to remark that

We are not concerned, here, with the rather shocking fact that, after twenty years' experience of the stupid brutality of totalitarianism and official violence, most intellectuals, in Italy and France and elsewhere on the continent, in seeking to become involved in politics have found it quite normal to commit themselves to another form of totalitarianism—that of Communist ideology and practice. However mistaken this choice may be, it has complex motives which it would take too long to disentangle here. But what is worth considering (and it has the advantage of removing the discussion from the purely topical plane) is the mistake that lies hidden behind the very way in which intellectuals conceived, and mostly still seem to conceive, their relationship with politics

and the responsibility this involves. This does not concern only Left-wing intellectuals; but since it is what is referred to as the Left that makes a particular point of questions of ideas, ideologies, and moral principles, it is natural to consider Left-wing intellectuals rather than others in any discussion on the relationship between ideas and politics.

TO PUT IT VERY SIMPLY, the intellectuals' mistake when they speak of politics is to pretend they are politicians. They use the language and attitudes of politicians when they talk about ideas and moral values. Now this is of no use to the mind or to morals or politics, for they subordinate intellectual and moral principles to political

Tempo Presente treated culture and criticism as universal matters without provincial restrictions, but the magazine had a still rarer and perhaps more important quality. Essays in our Italian magazines are almost always single, one might say fragmented, acts. Each contributor sings his own song—that is, he submits his article—and the only one who looks at the whole publication is the editor, he, too, an almost solitary individual. The only exceptions are party or strictly ideological periodicals, a useless exception because their unity is imposed from without. Chiaromonte tried to make *Tempo Presente* a "concert of ideas," that is, a spontaneously collective enterprise, not unlike what had been achieved years before in New York when, with Dwight Macdonald, Mary McCarthy, and other friends, he worked on the magazine politics. What impelled Chiaromonte in this attempt was his firm conviction that truth must be sought and found together with others.

Chiaromonte's interest in the theatre and the drama criticism he wrote for many years were of the same order. Some of his readers, though not the most attentive, have been heard to say that Chiaromonte was interested not so much in the theatre itself as in philosophising about plays and performances. Others found him too stern or too indulgent. The truth, if I am not mistaken, is that what Chiaromonte loved in the theatre was the mirror of man's encounter with man—society looking at itself—and of every man's encounter with his own destiny.

UNIQUE (or almost) among Italian intellectuals of our time, Chiaromonte was not a devotee of either Marx or Freud. His critical distance from these and other doctrines was established by the precept he selected as the programme of *Tempo Presente*: "To promote a reexamination of current modes of thought by comparing them with the reality of the present world." To carry out this examination, or rather to achieve a new awareness, Chiaromonte considered it valuable to have another look at Greek

thought. He had been doing so himself for a long time and had already expressed some of the conclusions he had drawn from that reading.

The reality that Chiaromonte saw around him today was a world of mindless violence: "Reason can have no hold on the individual who is convinced that the only purpose of life is to achieve oneself at any cost, to manifest in any way at all his existence here in this world, and who believes in nothing else. . . ."

This seemed to him modern man's essential conviction and "the sole absolute" that modern society has been able to express—"the right of every individual to total satisfaction, everyone's possession of reason as if by natural right, and the expression of oneself as the final purpose of life."

"The dementia, the violence, and discouragement in which we live have their moral origin in this principle, which is neither of the Left nor of the Right, neither of the avant-garde nor of the arrièrè-garde, and which no society, no form of culture or spiritual life can long withstand. However, absurd though it may be, as things stand today this principle prevails. . . . But it has no truth in it. And without truth, all it deserves is irony on the one hand and pity on the other."

There has been much grief at Chiaromonte's death, a natural grief that has been expressed in a great variety of forms. One expression particularly struck me for its aptness and truth. It is a tercet from Dante's *Purgatorio* (Canto XXII, lines 67–69) that Ugo Stille (of the "*Corriere delle Sera*") quoted in New York when he learned of his friend Chiaromonte's sudden death:

*Facesti come quei che va di notte,
che porta il lume retro e sè non giova
ma dopo sè fa le persone dotte.*

*Thou didst as he who travels in the night,
Who bears a lamp behind him, nor befriends
Himself, but those who follow leads aright. . . .*

Paolo Milano

aims, and muddle their political thought with confused concepts and diluted ethics.

It is not a case of what Julien Benda called the "*trahison des clercs*" in a famous pamphlet in 1927 (in which, incidentally, there was a good deal of truth). Benda accused the "*clercs*" of treason for having put their names, ideas, and talents at the service, first of State, and later of Party, propaganda, during and after the first World War. Against this degradation he claimed the right of intellectuals to remain strictly faithful to what one might call the tenets of reason, and to go to battle only when these were called in question—as Benda himself had seen happen during *l'affaire Dreyfus*.

The argument was weak, however, because it left the "*clerc*" free to decide for himself when these tenets were involved and when they were not; and if the truth involved in the Dreyfus case was an eternal principle, it took very little effort to maintain that the principle of freedom for which Republican France was fighting Imperial Germany was also eternal (as well, of course, as the "principle of justice" incarnate in the Bolshevik régime). So why should the principles of the so-called rational, Christian West, against those of the "barbarous, destructive East," not be eternal as well?

This is not what we are dealing with today; nor was it really what they were dealing with in those days, either. The first and most brilliant intellectual to prove this was André Malraux, who had already, in *Tentation de l'Occident* in 1926 (and even earlier, in an essay on "A Certain European Youth"), gone to the heart of the matter. If Europe was to be saved from decline, there was no place in it for the "*clerc*". The intellectual with any awareness of things must fling himself into the furnace of history, must "think" his history while participating totally in it. Malraux was well aware that this was a tragic choice, since it meant pursuing the logic of violent action and accepting the fact that Europe's destiny was one of wars and revolutions which might destroy it. But there was, he felt, no other way out of the stagnation of nihilism.

MALRAUX WAS at that time influenced by Nietzsche, Spengler, Marx, and (through Bernard Groethuysen) by Heidegger too; and, as was to appear clearly in his novels, he had already grasped the essence of Existentialist thought. But what decided his involvement in history as something thought out and acted out at the same time

was undoubtedly his own experience of Indo-China in revolt and China in revolution. Added to the new power of Soviet Russia, these upheavals seemed to him clear indications of "the meaning of history," and therefore of the intellectual's new function.

But wherein did this new function lie? It was in the radical acceptance of the Machiavellian principle that political action had its own morality, its own logic, its own directing ideas, which were independent of the morality of "unarmed prophets," the logic of the learned, and the ideas of philosophers.

The principle was not new, but the way of reconsidering it was. Because, unlike Machiavelli, these intellectuals, whether Marxists or not, were clearly aware of the fact that you cannot disregard the basically moral nature of politics without providing the support of an ideology that constitutes an ethical system itself; indeed that shows the only possible meaning morality can have in our time. Without it political action becomes pure nonsense and pure violence.

IS THERE ANY objection one can raise to this modern *Weltanschauung*? A single one, but a radical one: that this way of thinking not only makes politics into a form of morality but makes it into the supreme sphere, the final, total goal of moral activity. This in its turn suggests that the meaning of human life lies in politics, just as, to the religious man, its meaning lies in the existence of God.

Politics considered thus, and elevated to a reality beyond which there is nothing but mystification and empty words, has as its inevitable result (whatever the ideology it professes, even the most libertarian) the imposition of a moral principle by force—whether this principle is justice, equality, or even individual freedom. This at once means mass violence, maltreatment of the individual, and enslavement of social life.

The result is intolerable and absurd: not merely because of what recent history has shown us (since history teaches only those who wish to understand it), but because it contradicts, not so much common sense and morality, as the very nature of political action. For political action means working towards an end that may be right or not, but always case by case, fact by fact, moment by moment. It must never deal with things wholesale and at one fell swoop, as if human events and facts were logical formulae or figures, and as if ideas were facts.

BOOKS & WRITERS

Dr Johnson as Poet

By John Wain

AS JAMES BOSWELL approached the concluding pages of his *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, he decided, lawyer-fashion, that he ought to provide a summing-up, and proceeded to gird himself for the effort of writing that "character" of Johnson that is one of the most remarkable feats of his great book. He describes Johnson's physical appearance and presence, gives a sketch-map of his intellectual interests, outlines his moral and psychological nature, and estimates the powers of his mind. In the course of these remarks, Boswell puts in two observations that are, or should be, very much in the mind of anyone approaching Johnson as a poet. One is that Johnson's mind was so fertile of imagery that "he might have been perpetually a poet"; the other is that the imagery of Johnson's prose is more luxuriant than that of his verse.

Boswell, that is, had seen clearly two facts about Johnson which then became obscured for well over a hundred years: that he was a natural poet; and that the poetic power of his mind was, in some respects, more free to find itself in prose than in verse.

No one doubts that the ability to strike out concrete and original images is one of the primary features of the poetic mind. (At the present moment, with the collapse of all conventions of verse-form and a total confusion as to what constitutes "verbal music", it is perhaps the *only* feature that is generally recognised.) All good writers have it, but the poet has it most noticeably, and carries it—as Johnson did—into his conversation as well as his formal compositions. I remember Robert Frost, talking at the table about some woman whom conventional language would have des-

cribed as "elusive" or "mysterious." "She was like an orange pip on a plate," said Frost.

If we seek to recognise Johnson's poetic quality through his imagery, the easiest way is to take any volume of his prose works and let it fall open at any point.

Very few are involved in great events, or have their thread of life entwined with the chain of causes on which Armies or nations are suspended....

Of the thousands and ten thousands that perished in our late contests with France and Spain, a very small part ever felt the stroke of an enemy; the rest languished in tents and ships, amidst damps and putrefaction; pale, torpid, spiritless, and helpless; gasping and groaning unpitied among men made obdurate by long continuance of hopeless misery, and whelmed in pits, or heaved into the ocean, without notice and without remembrance.

The stream of time, which is continually washing the dissoluble fabricks of other poets, passes without injury by the adamant of Shakespeare.

A man who can write like this is not likely to fail completely when he attempts poetry. On the other hand, it should be admitted, most poetic conventions are limiting as well as enabling. One sees this very clearly at a time like the present, when most poets are either ranting *à la* Speakers' Corner or lipping in baby talk. But to some extent it has always been evident. Within the romantic conventions, there are some things that De Quincey's prose can do that Wordsworth's verse cannot. It was T. S. Eliot who laid it down, about fifty years ago, that "Poetry should be at least as well written as prose." But the fact is that the two forms can never achieve a regularised