

Poets Among the Demagogues

By LILLIAN SMITH

I WANT to discuss the poet in a world filled with demagogues, I want to stress the power of the poetic spirit in a time of clamor and hate and anarchic confusion. The demagogues are everywhere: not only in Selma, Alabama, and Neshoba County, Mississippi; not only on the streets of Birmingham and Harlem and in sheriffs' offices and governors' mansions, but in the United Nations, in new countries and old, new institutions and old. Of them all, perhaps the most dangerous demagogues are those that crouch in our own minds, whispering lies at a time when we so desperately need to hear the poet's deep truths. For we have desperate and difficult problems to deal with: problems that reach inside our homes and our hearts and pull us to the ends of the earth; problems that won't leave us alone; problems that shock us and frighten us.

Let me name only a few: police brutality, the Ku Klux Klan and its killers, capital punishment, drug addiction of the young, political tensions that grip Israel and Bonn and the Arab nations, that stir Indonesia, Vietnam, that tear at Cuba and China; there are our ghettos and our school dropouts and our babies so bereft of love that learning is impossible; there are counties in Alabama where not one Negro has ever voted; there is the violent death of the good and valiant, Negro and white, who are trying to win dignity and freedom for others; there are the starving children of Asia; there is quiet but terrible rural depravity; there is automation and massive conformity; and there is, always threatening us, nuclear warfare.

"What a terrible time we live in," the demagogue shouts. "Come with me and we'll go back to the old way, the good old times that never existed. Just follow me, we'll somehow get there."

But actually these horrendous, multiple, interlocking problems are only aspects of one big thing. This is the vast, urgent hunger of men everywhere to become more human. What could be

more exalting than this amazing upsurge of the spirit, the push forward, the sudden longing? The details can scare us to death, of course. But the phenomenon as a whole can excite us, lift and fill us with enormous energy and determination.

Once we see it, once we begin to realize, by act of imagination and heart, the meaning of what is happening to us, once we feel the direction we are going, then things will fall in line, chaos will resolve into new forms. And it is the poet's job to show us. For only the poet can look beyond details at the total picture; only the poet can feel the courage beyond fear, only he can grasp the splinters and bend them into a new wholeness that does not yet exist. It is his job to think not in years but in spans of thousands of years; his job to measure the slow movement of the human spirit evolving; his to see that the moment is close for all mankind to make another big leap forward; it is his job to scoop up the debris of our times and show us the giant outlines of the human spirit becoming more able to relate to the unknown and the unseen.

Teilhard de Chardin was a great poet as well as a fine scientist, and, as poets do, he now and then spoke as simply as a child. He said, "It is because the earth is round that we have become human: you see, we could not get away, we could not help but rub against each other; and this rubbing polished our minds, sent the mental temperature up; in such heat minds became flexible, moved with speed; became involved and convoluted and related in ten billion ways. Now, suddenly today, we are only a few hours from every man on earth, and our minds are showing a startling leap forward toward complexity: men in small groups, collaborating, can solve problems in a few weeks or months or even days that one man, working alone and in isolation, could never have solved had he lived a thousand years." In the last fifty years, he often said, more scientific problems have been articulated, more new questions asked, more discoveries made than in the past ten thousand years.

But where will all this activity take us? It is the poets' job to tell us. Are they doing it? What are they saying? What are novelists and dramatists saying about this tremendous thing that is happening to us? I'm afraid they are saying almost nothing. Most are still talking the old

nihilisms of the nineteenth century redressed in new clothes; most are still fixated on narcissistic problems that have sloshed over from Victorian days; most are still moaning about the human condition, the tragic absurdity of man's plight, the hideous lack of cosmic purpose; most mistake an earth-size movement for no motion at all. I cannot think of one who is creating characters who might have qualities needed for this adventurous age. What has Albee given us? Genet? Sartre? Mailer? Self-absorbed, most cannot tear their eyes from their own small depravities. So they are giving us fragmented sketches of sick people; they hold before us in play and story a never-ending bleak view of miserable, lost, lonely schizophrenics. Of course we should look with compassion at our sick and lost ones—young and old—but they should not be presented to us in drama and novel as though they are the whole of contemporary life, as though they are all we have to count on for the future.

TURNING big issues into small ones because, however talented, they are not poet enough to grasp the vastness of contemporary possibilities—what could be more dangerous today? Turning small issues into large. Here is where poets reduce themselves to demagogues. By using the big distortion they become guilty of arousing needless fear and despair; they force their listeners into dead ends that don't exist; sealing the present tight with their own anxieties they declare, "This age has no exit." They treat *hope* as the only four-letter word you must never be caught using.

I do not want to be misunderstood: it is not the presence of splintered, sick, empty people in books and on stage that is wrong; it is the acting as if there is nobody else in the world; it is the omission, the absence of context, that so dangerously distorts things.

We cannot act as if this is all, as if there is nothing more to count on; how do we dare when here we are in the midst of the greatest transformation the human race has ever experienced? How can it be carried through unless the young believe in it, unless they feel it in the big? Unless they sense an exalted purpose behind this amazing evolution of the spirit? We know man's evolution is now in his own hands; we know from here on out it is up to him; from here on out he makes the decisions; he has stepped out (or God has let him step out) of natural law—not into chaos but into a new creativity that must find its needed forms. But do the young know this? Have the poets offered them a new vision, a new faith, a courage that races through their blood?

It is so easy to panic, to give up in
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Lillian Smith is a novelist who has long had a close interest in racial problems and other social issues. This article is adapted from a talk prepared for presentation earlier this year in Washington, D.C., at the National Women's Division of the American Jewish Congress.

Machiavelli

By KENNETH REXROTH

TO RE-READ Machiavelli's *The Prince* in middle age in the afternoon of a century of political horror is to experience a wistful incongruity—exactly what were the 400 years of scandal all about? As objective analyst of successful despotism, Machiavelli seems today too confident of the good sense of those clever and forceful enough to rise to positions of tyranny. He assumes the fundamental good will of his prince toward his subjects, or at least his intelligent rapacity and his accessibility to advice. Our twentieth-century dictators all claim to have learned from Machiavelli. Since the fall of Bismarck, they have violated every item of his advice.

Machiavelli's defenders have said he studied politics with the value-neuter eye of a scientist. Yet in spite of his doubts of the natural goodness of man, he, like Socrates, hoped that rulers of the state, one or many, might be more open to reason than not, and if presented with a demonstrable good would probably choose it. We do not think of Machiavelli as tainted with the Socratic fallacy, but so it is. He is the most astute philosopher of history after Thucydides, but both believed history might be taught to behave itself, a belief for which their narratives give little warrant.

Most people read only *The Prince* and they read that as advocating, from general principles, a set of rules. *The Prince* and *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy* should be read together. Machiavelli's realism brings to its end a long tradition of manuals of advice to princes and descriptions of ideal states. However much he tried for objectivity, Aristotle's *Politics* is half-prescriptive and its medieval successors are nothing else. Machiavelli realized that the student of politics must concern himself with what is, not with what should be, and that the greatest of fallacies is to start by seeking first principles, transcendental sanctions, and final causes. He knew that the hortatory philosophers of history and politics have only provided makers of history, finders, keepers, and losers of power with a rhetoric of noble fraud. He was the first to understand that history is not going anywhere, it is just what happens, and the only values operating in it are those of general welfare, the simple goods of actual men. Neither history nor politics is logical. They are the first empiricisms, and the

only first principles of politics are the individuals who live it. *The Prince* studies a practicable despotism—Cesare Borgia's; *The Discourses* a successful republic—Rome, from the fall of the kings to the rise of the demagogues. Although the analysis is couched in imperative form, the source of this imperative is mundane and secular—the well-being of each citizen, not Freedom, or the Good, or Kingship, or Democracy.

If we think of Machiavelli as writing speculatively in leisured retirement, we miss his urgency. Venice, Milan, Florence, Naples, the Papacy, were being emasculated, reduced to pawns, and impoverished by the imperialism of France and Spain. In Dante's *De Monarchia* the union of Italy is an ideal. Machiavelli knew that it would have to be achieved within a generation or the Italian cities would never recover. Union or decay—this is the concern that motivates *The Discourses*, *The Prince*, *The Art of War*, *The History of Florence*, *The Life of Castruccio*. The plays, *Mandragola* and *Clezia*, satirize a sick, parasitic society.

Where even favorable critics have found Machiavelli's attitude toward human nature "crude, unsympathetic, and cynical," I see the exasperation of desperation. When he says that tempted, even enlightened politicians probably will behave like fools or rascals, he is hardly provided with contrary evidence by the words of Livy or the experience of a lifetime. So he assumes historical action will take place at the lowest moral level necessary to insure continuity. When the state or individual actor falls below that level, it goes out of existence. When it rises above it, history gains an unexpected bonus. With a minimal faith in human motives, a tough-minded optimist may shape a politics of possible goods. The alternative is withdrawal into a tightly organized subculture where men live not by accident but for values, a garrison of ideals—Plato's *Republic*.



He believed that although men do not infallibly choose a demonstrable good, society might be organized to insure that they do so more often than not and that where they do not, their choices of evil may cancel one another out. How? Machiavelli is seldom put forward as an advocate of freedom, least of all freedom of speech. Yet at the beginning of *The Discourses* he says, "Under the emperors from Nerva to Marcus Aurelius, everyone could hold and defend any opinion he pleased, and enjoyed the greatest freedom of action compatible with social order," and this resulted in maximum happiness and security and redounded to the glory of the rulers. The opening paragraphs of *The Discourses* reveal his difference from previous writers on politics. He is a dynamist. "To have removed the cause of social conflict from Rome would have been to deprive her of her power of growth." He stresses that the Roman constitution both generated tension and discharged it, and "no faction, no private citizen ever attempted to call in the aid of a foreign power. Having the remedy at home, there was no need to look abroad for it."

FOR Machiavelli the end of politics is man, not the State, nor did he believe that "war is the health of the State," although in Renaissance Italy that was its permanent condition. For him the end of war is peace, even behind the lines while war is going on. Nor did he believe that ends justify means. He considers in detail what means must be employed to create what ends, a quite different concept. He knows that social good is only the good of multitudes of individual men and flourishes in a dynamic, never a static, context. The ideal norm, the paradigm structured by logical law, has no relevance. Laws should be framed to enable the creative interaction of contradictions. Perhaps better than Marx he understood that the force behind contradictions of policy is class struggle, but he believed that the good constitution should use, not repress class conflict.

The virtues of Machiavelli's prose survive all but the worst translations. He was a man of affairs writing for nonliterary purposes and out of years of experience in using language in matters of life and death. Italian as he wrote it was a medium of direct communication, an instrument to achieve concrete ends—a practice in which he had few followers until recent years. As a diversion he wrote the best Italian comedy, as black humor quite the equal of Jonson's *Volpone*. It was *Mandragola*, a work of a most unliterary toughness and maturity.

There are many good, cheap editions of *The Prince*, that in the Modern Library includes *The Discourses*. *Mandragola* is in Eric Bentley's *The Classic Theater*, Volume I.