
LETTERS

Havel's "Open Letter"

I CANNOT RESIST the urge to write and tell you how enormously impressed I am by Vaclav Havel's "An Open Letter From Prague" [ENCOUNTER September].

The combination of eloquence, wisdom and courage displayed is quite staggering. Although many of the situations and events dealt with are profoundly depressing, one is left in the end with a paradoxical sense of cheerfulness and uplift, akin to that produced by witnessing a first-class performance in the theatre of a great tragedy.

Indeed, the overall impression left by Mr Havel's piece to some extent belies a number of the specific pessimistic statements made within it. As long as there is one person left in Czechoslovakia capable of thinking and writing this kind of letter, there seems to me some hope for Czechoslovakia—and for the rest of us.

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Kedourie's Hammar skjöld

IN THE LIGHT of Professor Elie Kedourie's conclusion [ENCOUNTER, August] that Hammar skjöld, "searching confidently for one knows not what, fell in an obscure forlorn, far-away place", it could be argued that he had realised his goal and had been allowed the possibility he had faced in the early 1950s, of a death without significance. In the three years before his election as Secretary-General, Hammar skjöld had felt his life to be without purpose, and had devoted much time to an exploration of his trouble in *Markings* (1966). In a profound meditation on the life of Christ (*Markings*, p. 72) he explored the tensions Christ felt as he considered the various possibilities open to him, and noted particularly his readiness to accept a death which might be without significance, as his right and proper way. It was an example which was of great help to him, as it has been to countless others since, without their being accused of severe spiritual pride.

Professor Kedourie quotes the "Marking" from p. 133 about his responsibility for God:

"Your responsibility is indeed terrifying. If you fail it is God, thanks to your having betrayed Him, who will fail mankind. You fancy you can be responsible to God; can you carry the responsibility for God?"

Gustaf Aulen reveals in his analysis of *Markings*, *Dag Hammar skjöld's White Book* (SPCK, London 1969), that there is a discrepancy here between the original Swedish and W. H. Auden's English translation. Aulen explains (p. 148) that this "Marking" is a rare instance of Hammar skjöld's use of the word "our" and should open: "How terrifying OUR responsibility." Hammar skjöld was fully aware he shared man's

immense responsibility with every other human being. The opening four words set the context for the remaining sentences in which he talks of his work as the elected Secretary General of the United Nations. If man betrays God, then it is God who fails mankind. He focuses on a reality which most of us would rather not face, but the truth of it can hardly be denied. He did not see himself as a new Messiah, but as a human being who was conscious of the responsibility placed upon him.

July 29th, 1975, would have been Hammar skjöld's 70th birthday. It is to be hoped that future memorials to his work might be more understanding, not only of his spirituality, but appreciative of his political contribution and judgment. Perhaps Dr Henry Kissinger with his shuttle diplomacy is one such heir.

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Sufi

WITH REFERENCE TO the article "Sufism and Pseudo-Sufism" in your May 1975 issue, your contributor L. P. Elwell-Sutton may recall the advice of Arif Yahya on the subject of "unorthodox" teachers:

"Do not expect the way in which they bring their teaching to be wholly within your ordinary way of understanding. A pearl may be carried in a leather purse. The ignorant cry out: 'This square object with the flap does not look like the necklace which has been described to me'."

By arguing that Idries Shah does not fit into an authentic ("spiritual") Sufi mould, your contributor re-enacts the classic situation in which individuals down the ages have attacked Sufi teachers for not being "religious" enough. In the 10th century A.D. it was the liberal views of the physician ibn Sina (Avicenna) which suffered this fate; in the 12th century the Master Sanai, noted for his love imagery, and the philosopher El-Ghazali, whose books were burned by his critics, were similarly castigated. The turn of the literary genius Hakim Jami came in the 15th century, when religious enthusiasts misquoted his work in their attempts to discredit him.

The examples are numerous. There always seem to have been people who, in their preoccupation with outward piety, have failed to grasp that Sufism is organic, not repetitive; that the true teacher teaches for his own time—not the time before. Any person who was to appear now as a sort of carbon copy Saadi or Hafiz, and attempt to apply in our atom-splitting space age the methods and phraseology born of the needs of the 11th, 12th or even 19th centuries—he indeed might be judged an impostor.

The contention that Idries Shah does not repeat the words "God" and "love" sufficiently often seems at variance with the ideas of Jalaluddin Rumi—whom your contributor concedes is an authentic Sufi—when he wrote about love in the *Masnavi*:

"Explanation by the tongue makes most things clear,

But love unexplained is clearer."

(tr. E. H. Whinfield)

Discussing God, in Rumi's view, also has its limitations. As he writes in the Prologue to his *Masnavi* tales:

*"Can I explain 'The Friend' [God] to one to whom
He is no friend? . . .
. . . 'Tis best to veil the secrets of 'The Friend'.
So give good heed to the morals of these stories.
That is better than that the secrets of 'The Friend'
Should be noised abroad in the talk of strangers."*

As for Sufism being "not concerned with the betterment of the human race", your contributor

claims that "Sufism is a deeply-rooted product of Islam"—one of the four main duties of which is charity and compassion for fellow human beings. Rumi's approving description of Daquqi shows the latter as a man,

*"Having compassion on mankind, and wholesome
as water,
A kind intercessor, and one whose prayers were
heard.
Benevolent to the good and the bad, and a firm ally,
Better than a mother, and kinder than a father."*

Words, Words, Words (III)*



THE WRITING OF blurbs for book jackets or publishers' catalogues is a difficult art, and the results commonly please no one, and certainly not the author of the book. Here is a specimen which at least possesses the putative virtues of accuracy, informativeness and modesty:

"We have little hesitation in claiming that this relatively new book by Mr X represents an advance on the author's previous one, which nonetheless received rather favourable mention in a leading provincial newspaper. The present book is well written, in a style which combines the gritty with the fluid. Not so much a novel as an extended documentary prose-poem, it is an account of good and evil in a contemporary setting and all of us, whether men or women. 'The Spenser of Trollopes' is how the Eriskay Reporter has described Mr X. . . ."

And so forth. Mind you, there is one class of persons who appreciate blurbs: the reviewers. Many a brilliantly mordant review owes more to the blurb than to the book, or to the reviewer.

Not long ago I found myself having to shorten a number of blurbs, for an overcrowded list of forthcoming publications. From 250 words to 150, to 100, then to 50. Impossible though further cutting seemed each time, yet it proved not only possible but preferable as well: finally I arrived at an admirably economical description of the essence of the book. But then I had to go and put words back in. Readers aren't happy with essences, whether in blurbs or in books: it seems they need a generous emulsion of words in which their minds can float comfortably; they need a fair amount of verbal roughage, or of verbal smoothage. Many of the words don't get noticed at all, and if all that was offered were

essence, then the essence might go unobserved. I know we were taught that in great writing every word is strictly necessary, and cannot be replaced by any other, and there is not a superfluous syllable. I'm sure that is true. But I don't think I am talking about great writing—there is never very much of that on the scene at any one time. I don't think I am talking about great readers, either. Heaven help the poor publisher if he had to depend solely on great writers and great readers!

SOME WRITERS ARE NOT very good at reading their own writing, even. Recently I was studying a book by an academic, the theme of which was the symbolism of excretory processes in the works of Virginia Woolf: a new insight into this celebrated novelist, I should imagine, and one likely to show how highly "relevant" she is. The scholar had been discussing a story entitled "The Ladies' Lavatory", and went on in the next sentence to refer to a novel called *Flush*. As a matter of fact I did know that *Flush* was the name of a dog, but the associations evoked by the contiguity were such as to demolish that suspension of disbelief so often required when reading academic exegesis.

Mistakes or insensitivities incurred by people writing in a language not their own is a different matter, not open to contempt or reproach. Sometimes they have a splendour of their own. I remember in the late 1940s being impressed by an Egyptian student's reference to "this Age of Atomic Pomp": it evoked a romantic image of nuclear reactors in the shape of great pyramids, with the Sphinx brooding over them. A little later I realised that the confusion between "P" and "B" was at work, this being a distinction non-existent in Arabic—in fact we use the forms "Pasha" and "Basha" indifferently, since the original sound is somewhere in between. What the student actually had in mind was the atomic bomb.

BUT BACK TO OUR BLURBS. The dictionary tells us only that the word "blurb" originated in U.S. slang. My theory has it that the word is a skilful conflation of a number of other words, among them "blur", "bluff", "blub", "blush", "bluster", "burble", "babble", "burp" and "blunder." As I say, a difficult art.

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* Previous columns in this series appeared in ENCOUNTER, November and December.