

cluding Lillian Hellman and Granville Hicks, which applauded the trials. It called upon liberals to assist efforts of the Soviet Union to cleanse itself of "insidious internal dangers" that were the chief threat to democracy and peace.⁴ His only reference to this incident was that the purges were nebulously reported and that "there would never be unanimity about them, except in respect to the general uneasiness they created in left-wing intellectuals." Cowley's vain cover-up attempt was still too discomfoting to recount, resulting in yet another cover-up.

Cowley did not disclose his running battle with various anti-Stalinist liberals. He feuded with Edmund Wilson when the latter returned from Russia disillusioned. Nothing was mentioned about John Dewey's resignation from the staff of *The New Republic* in 1937 due to his specific indignation at Cowley and the journal's fellow traveling. Cowley's hostility to John Dos Passos and James T. Farrell escaped notice. Dos Passos impugned the sanctity of the Loyalist cause in the Spanish Civil War, undermining the most seductive vehicle of the Popular Front. Cowley berated the *Partisan Review's* attacks on the Soviet Union. He objected to its factional politics while never criticizing the politicized *New Masses*. Urging writers to join the revolution and enlisting as a mouthpiece for the party line himself, Cowley demanded that the *Partisan Review* confine itself to non-partisan literary commentary. By not including those who were skeptical of the "golden dream," Cowley deadens the actual controversy and skirts a far more crucial issue. Why did he remain for so long the captive of an illusion?

He fails to discuss his acerbic vendetta against the New Humanists who were considered a fundamental philosophical threat to the prevailing social radicalism. He joined the communist chorus in castigating them for being closet reactionaries who defended their class prerogatives as ivory tower academics and clergy. The New Humanists cultivated classical civilized standards and articulated a penetrating critique of modernity. They generally

refused to subordinate their vocation as scholars to the revolutionary cause. Cowley ridiculed their belief in Puritanism and tradition, accusing them of snobbery, obscurantism, and even anti-Semitism.⁵ As literary editor, he printed Mike Gold's vicious review of Thornton Wilder which defiled Christian believers and slandered Wilder as an effete homosexual. This invective reduced the level of political discourse to the gutter; its abusive rhetoric mirrored symbolically the savagery of the Stalinist revolution. Elemental honesty and decency are more than merely bourgeois virtues. Cowley reproached Trotsky for his self-serving historical accounts. Hopefully, Cowley will not repeat this same mistake. His readers eagerly await the time when, as a central figure in the literary wars of the thirties, Cowley will reveal the rest of the story.

Reviewed by GARY BULLERT

¹"Fellow Traveler," *The New Republic* (May 1, 1935), p. 346. ²"The Record of a Trial," *The New Republic* (April 7, 1937), p. 270. ³*Ibid.*, pp. 267-8. ⁴"Leading Artists, Educators Support Soviet Trial Verdict," *The Daily Worker* (April 28, 1938), p. 4. ⁵"Angry Professors," *The New Republic* (April 4, 1930), p. 207.

Spooks and Satan

Devil Take Him, by Ralph de Toledano,
New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979.
283 pp. \$11.95.

THIS NOVEL IS an unusual effort to combine two seemingly disparate themes. The main story line concerns the murder of the anarchist intellectual, Carlo Tresca, in New York in 1943 and the successful effort of the book's protagonist to track down and kill his putative assassin. All this is enveloped with theological musings about guilt, sin, and the Devil by Paul Castelar, the renowned novelist of Sephardic Jewish descent who is the central figure.

Ralph de Toledano writes with exceptional fluidity, terseness, and vivid imagery although he descends, perhaps too frequently, to the trendy scatological cant of the day. William F. Buckley, Jr., has called him "one of the most gifted writers of the world." Whether this judgment is excessive or not, de Toledano is a fine craftsman in a trade where the ham-handed carry most of the union cards.

When the novel opens, 57 year old Castelar has a terminal heart attack at a cocktail party. His will designates Peter Minot, a fellow writer and contemporary who is footloose as to life-purpose, to do his biography. The \$50,000 bequest spurs Minot to search for the *real* Paul (on the implicit assumption that a single unambiguous answer to this sort of question exists). The quest takes him to many beds and to a bossy ex-wife who experienced a passionate love-hate relationship with Castelar.

Castelar is a demon-obsessed man. He looks past his women "as if he thought Lady Macbeth was in the corner of the room trying to wash the blood off her hands...." He left oracular notebooks which declare that "the body is laden with sin," that "evil is the totality, the source and the power," and that "one fornication—or a thousand—does not mean damnation" because "we are born to sin, and to live in the apprehension of sin."

There is a Jamesian touch to this hinting of unrevealed horrors, which never materialize except for the fact that de Toledano is highly ambivalent about his protagonist and his Delphic pronouncements. Thus, James Downey, a down-to-earth ex-Marine and onetime organizer of the possible precursor of the Loyal American Underground, says about Castelar:

Because he was the person he was, there had to be a big gaudy reason for that guilt, and since he couldn't find it in Freud, he took it from the Book of Revelations. When he thought he wasn't as good a writer as he should be, he decided he'd made a compact with some spic leprechauns.... You've been hyp-

notized by a bunch of kookie broads who like to think it's romantic to shack up with a famous writer who had the Devil creeping into bed with him. Sure, I know how Paul died! But you know what Paul saw? It was much worse than the Devil. He saw nothing.

Castelar feels guilty about sex; he feels guilty about life; he feels guilty because he feared combat (what combat soldier doesn't?), and he feels guilty because his Spanish-Jewish ancestors, like those of Francisco Franco, chose Catholicism over the stake.

The ex-wife finally shows Minot Castelar's secret autobiography. This shifts the book's focus to the anti-communist espionage theme. The pivotal event is the murder of Carlo Tresca, called Gino Rosselli in the novel. Who was he? Castelar explains: "His function was to engage evil and to fight for the soul, though he would have laughed at the mention of either one. Mussolini hated and feared him. Stalin hated him." Downey, the political-action pro, has a different appraisal. He sums up Tresca to Minot: "He was another nut. Politics and fancy talk and no discipline. So they put a hole in him."

I never knew Carlo Tresca. His reputation was that of a charming anarchist intellectual of upper-class origin, great integrity, a robust appetite for Chianti and women, and a flaming hatred for Mussolini. He sent several people at various times to assassinate *il Duce*, but either Tresca talked too much or the planning was botched, causing failure with fatal consequences.

Tresca broke decisively with communism. In World War II he fought courageously and effectively to swing Italo-American organizations to an anti-communist position, a venture that could have been decisive in shaping Italy's postwar future. He believed that he ran into one of Stalin's top executioners in New York and told friends that he smelled the stench of death. This observation might have been dismissed as hyperbole except for the fact that he was gunned down in New York shortly thereafter. The police

traced the murder car, picked up a small-time hood who held to the rule of *omerta*, and marked the killing as either a syndicate or a contract job because of a woman.

In *Devil Take Him*, Ralph de Toledano pursues the hypothesis held by most anti-communists at the time that the real assassin was Vittorio Vidali AKA Carlos Contreras. He pursues this Soviet agent to San Juan, tracks him to a sleazy brothel, has a confrontation with him which is remarkably well done, and finally kills him with a knife. Vidali or Contreras is treated as the incarnation of evil, as a Devil surrogate, and also as an embodiment of brutal and violent *machismo*. He plays a similar role in an earlier de Toledano novel, *Day of Reckoning*.

This is an aspect of the book which intrigued me since I knew Carlos Contreras briefly when I was in Mexico in my twenties and a Communist. My wife and I were invited to lunch with the president of one of the Mexican Government's most important agricultural banks. Our host, a secret Communist, proudly introduced us to a squat, powerfully-built man with a huge head, whose face radiated authority, power and violence: "My house guest, Comandante Carlos, a hero of the Spanish civil war."

Comandante Carlos told us frankly that the war was already lost and that the key remaining problem was the exfiltration of valuable Party cadres. We did not know that he was in Mexico partly to plan an attempt on Trotsky's life. Nor did we know that in Spain, according to historian Hugh Thomas, he had been "the moving spirit" behind the creation of the Fifth Republican Regiment, a highly disciplined, Communist Party-controlled force which sent 8,000 men to the front. "As ruthless as he was efficient and imaginative," he sent both cowards and anti-communists before firing squads.

One of his more despicable acts was the murder of Andrés Nin, the anti-communist leader of the POUM. Alexander Orlov, Moscow's top NKVD man in Spain, had Nin tortured to reveal the

names of his associates so they could be kidnapped for a treason show trial. But Nin heroically resisted torture. Contreras arranged to have a Party murder squad dress up in captured Nazi uniforms, "rescue" Nin while noisily gabbling in German, and then murder him. This proved, according to the Communist Party press, that Nin had really been working for Hitler! Contreras' last known assignment was to take charge of the Communist Party in Trieste and organize the murder of Marshal Tito.

The late Bertram D. Wolfe, one of the top leaders of the American Communist party in the late 1920's, once told me that Contreras gave him such a feeling of horror and disgust that he refused to shake hands with him. This was characteristic of Wolfe, a gentle Leninist, who had wholeheartedly accepted the doctrine, but not those who turned words into actions. Wolfe lacked the thirst for evil of Berthold Brecht, who once exulted: "Sink into the mud, embrace the butcher, but change the world."

Did Contreras mastermind the Tresca killing? Would Moscow have sent in a notorious executioner, who had been under a U.S. deportation order since 1927, to recruit syndicate gunmen? We will probably never know the answer. But certainly Contreras deserved a hard death and it is a pity that Castelar was able to dispatch him merely in a literary, rather than literal, manner. If he is still this side of Hades, I suspect the 80 year-old Carlos Contreras is cultivating his garden somewhere in southern Europe and reminiscing fondly about ancient crimes with cronies.

De Toledano is basically right in seeing the Devil of our day as an iron bureaucrat, whether Nazi, Communist, Islamic zealot, or the servant of one of the newer bacterial nationalist movements that infest our planet. Such people are not the Lucifers of Milton. They are too dull for literature. They kill unflinchingly as a machine kills. Their only virtue is obedience. "*Meine Ehre ist Treue*," as Heinrich Himmler put it.

Reviewed by NATHANIEL WEYL

The Secret of Things

Reflections on History, by Jacob Burckhardt, *Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Press, 1979. 353 pp. \$9.00 (paper \$4.00).*

MOST PHILOSOPHERS prior to the nineteenth century did not hold the study of history in high regard. Aristotle remarked that "poetry is more philosophical and profound than history," Descartes that those who model their behavior on historical events are "prone to the madness of romantic paladins (*à tomber dans les extravagances des paladins*)," and Kant, in an essay seeking to "find a clue" to the philosophy of history, that "the web of history as a whole appears to be woven from folly and childish vanity, often, too, from puerile wickedness and love of destruction...." These negative judgments and feelings can be traced, very generally, to an influence exerted by Platonism. By positing Goodness and Truth in an extra-sensory, timeless dimension of forms or ideas, Platonism fostered a view of history not merely as unintelligible but as a kind of moral affront—a confused spectacle unworthy of being investigated. The philosophical quest for enduring values, it was felt, would not be furthered by a stop-over at the red-light district of change and time.

Since the nineteenth century, philosophers have become less prudish and the resulting offspring or "philosophies of history" have been numerous. They can be characterized with reference principally to two conceptual poles. At one extreme, positivists argue for the extension of the procedures of the natural sciences to history, maintaining (very generally) that the process of doing history consists in ascertaining facts, then framing laws from these facts by induction. At the other extreme, idealistic or romantically-inclined thinkers maintain that the sort of distinction between facts and ideas upheld in the natural sciences cannot be applied to history and that therefore history must be constituted as an autonomous discipline, "scientific" only on its own terms. What

both of these schools affirm is that history is an intelligible process quite apart from any moral meaning that may be drawn from it.

In turning now to the works of Jacob Burckhardt, the nineteenth century Swiss historian and author of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, one is confronted with a view of history very different from that of either positivism or idealism. "Clear-cut concepts belong to logic, not to history," he declares in *Reflections on History*, a collection of drafts or notes of lectures assembled after his death and here re-issued in an exquisitely made, but inexpensive book by Liberty Classics. Elsewhere in this work, which gives a more comprehensive account of Burckhardt's view of history than any of his other works, he not only dissociates himself from most of the major premises associated with "scientific" history (for example, that geography and climate should play a major role in understanding the development of civilization, or that history manifests either spiritual or intellectual progress), but also detaches himself from any idealistic or romantically-inclined perspective as well. Though Burckhardt often compared history, as many idealists have done, to art, calling it "sheer poetry," he also said that "Art bound down to facts, *still more to thoughts*, is lost" (emphasis mine). Indeed, he distrusted ideas (particularly philosophical ones) quite as much as he did facts and would not have agreed with R. G. Collingwood that history is "a re-enactment of the past in the mind of the historian." Far from contrasting science and history, Burckhardt spoke of these two disciplines as being "alone capable of a detached, disinterested participation in the life of things"—though history, for its part, "must forever remain a mystery, since we can only know this or that force at work in it, never all of them."

What distinguishes Burckhardt from most modern interpreters of history is not, however, merely his distrust of any scheme set forth to explain history. Rather, it is also his view that whatever intelligibility history *does* possess cannot be separated