

BOOK REVIEWS

The Voice of the Dolphins and Other Stories. By LEO SZILARD. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961. Pp. 122. \$3.00. (cloth), \$1.00 (paper).

It is somewhat surprising that our society has produced so little first-rate satiric writing. We have, to be sure, a fair number of bad-tempered columnists and cartoonists, of debunking novelists and playwrights and, lately, even of night club entertainers whose gleeful vulgarity extends to many revered institutions. More often than not, however, such kinds of satire tend to be directed against sitting ducks—beatniks and psychoanalysis, the national debt and the more egregious suburban follies—or against thick-skinned victims, such as Madison Avenue or television, which apparently flourish on abuse.

It is possible that the role once played by satire is increasingly occupied by the kind of palatable social criticism in which, with most of the trappings of the social scientists, clever journalists systematically describe various facets of ordinary life and endow our familiar habits with the romance inherent in statistics and special nomenclature. This kind of enterprise depends for its effectiveness upon the appearance of solemnity and dispassionate literal-mindedness, two qualities which are conspicuously alien to the satiric spirit.

The scarcity of authentic, memorable satire in our time doubtless has several causes, and speculations on this matter may lead to disturbing notions about the national character. Satire, it may be argued, does not thrive in a mirthless environment—or in a timid or a complacent one. But what must be recognized is that great satire is rare in any age, chiefly because satire is a very difficult art. The successful satirist is, as a rule, unusually perceptive, worldly, uninhibited, articulate. But beyond these qualities, his art requires the power of invention, the capacity to create the kind of robust fantasy—whether it be a complete myth or a posture assumed by the author—to which, above all else, the satires of Lucian and Rabelais, Swift and Voltaire, owe their survival. The “messages” of such men are often of secondary interest to the reader; the issues to which the satirist addresses himself are, more often than not, ephemeral. Hence the originality and aptness of the manifest fiction which distinguishes satire from ordinary polemic largely determines the extent to which the satirist can arrest and sustain our interest.

Even those only moderately familiar with the achievements of Leo Szilard will expect from the writings of this astonishing man a high order of sophistication, authority, and shrewdness. To these virtues, *The Voice of the Dolphins* makes it clear, one more must be added—sheer literary inventiveness. For

whatever satisfaction or distress we may find in the convictions implicit in this book, the brilliantly imaginative conceits which form the framework for most of Szilard's satiric undertakings are its most remarkable accomplishment.

Thus the title-story, the longest in the book, is a pseudo-history of international affairs from 1960 to 1990, in itself by no means an original satiric device. Szilard, however, has embodied this procedure in a brilliantly extravagant fable. In effect, it is the story of the dolphins, whose high intelligence initially makes them the object of research at the internationally-supported Biological Research Institute in Vienna, but who rapidly become the guiding intellects of the Institute. Among their accomplishments is the discovery of Amruss, a protein product of algae, which depresses fertility in women but not in men, leads to world-wide birth control (and appropriate complications), and insures unique prosperity and power for the Institute itself.

Similar imaginative triumphs are accomplished in each of the shorter stories. "My Trial as a War Criminal" (which originally appeared in this journal)¹ succeeds, according to the dust-jacket, in showing "how foolish Vengeance can look if it masquerades as Justice." This figure is doubtless satisfactory, but it seems to me that what the story really does is to formulate some of the most agonizing questions raised by the bombing of Hiroshima, the Nuremberg trials (and now, inevitably by the prosecution of Eichmann) within the context of a brilliant fiction.

Superficially, Szilard appears to employ a number of well-worn satiric or Utopian devices: the "time machine" or Rip Van Winkle formula in which a sleeper wakes in a future century; the pseudo-history of the future; the voice from a planet; the planetary visitors to earth. Actually, however, he has exploited these traditional gambits with a kind of wild ingenuity and to striking comic and satiric effect. The "time machine," for example, is actually a super deep-freezing process by which not only the protagonist but a number of his fellow citizens are plunged *in statu dormiendi*. The visitors to earth, from which all life has vanished, are able to reconstruct its former economic system from an inspection of the pay-toilets in Grand Central Station.

If I seem to be laboring Szilard's talents as a story-teller, it is because his mastery of this indispensable element in the satirist's art is what strikes me as most surprising. Needless to say, the ultimate appeal of this book is not that of pleasurable fantasy. From even the most frivolous of its stories there emerges a sense of the outrage produced in a humane and sagacious man by the inhumanity and folly of our time. Szilard's assessment of our present conduct and our destiny assumes, indeed, a special kind of urgency precisely because of the fictional artifice with which it is presented.

Within the inventive framework of each of these stories there are literally scores of transient satiric thrusts, devastating judgments, novel proposals as to how men may yet survive on this planet. They emerge, often in the funniest

¹ 17 U. CHI. L. REV. 79 (1949).

passages, as aphorisms. (A dolphin, bewildered by the American system, asks "whether it would be correct to assume that Americans were free to say what they think because they did not think what they were not free to say.") In the mock-history there are solutions to international problems which are "impractical" only because they are so intensely reasonable. Among the victims of Szilard's gift for reduction to absurdity are American foundations, politicians of every nation, the abusers of technological discoveries, and a dozen different doctrines which have been involved in the conduct of national and international affairs. And beneath every particularized assault there lies the terrible hypothesis which is given explicit formulation in the words of the mechanical inhabitants of the mythical planet, Cybernetica: "[T]here exist organisms on Earth engaged in cooperative enterprises which are not subject to the laws of reason."

I am not certain whether many of Mr. Szilard's readers will entirely share my enthusiasm for his book. It is diffuse and the stories differ widely in magnitude and tone (for they were written at different times and places over a period of twelve years). The individual pieces tend to be sprawling and bumpy, without even the "unity" of the pat allegories or fictional case-histories from which many satires derive their form. But the greatest satirists have been cheerfully indifferent to conventional notions of structure: Horace is shamelessly digressive; *Absalom and Achitophel* ends with preposterous abruptness; *Candide* and *A Tale of a Tub* are monuments of apparent disorganization.

There will also no doubt be those who, as always with good satire, lament the absence of "affirmative" principles and dismiss what Szilard has to say as misanthropic, destructive, or capricious. Such strictures often proceed from sources more basic than a goody-good thirst for benevolent moralizing. When a writer addresses himself, as does Szilard, to the gravest and deepest problems which confront humanity, his readers tend to expect from him a doctrine of salvation; they anticipate that he will seek to persuade them to believe as he does and to follow the path to which he points. Szilard appears, like certain great teachers, to delight above all in pointing to the paradoxes and puzzles of the human condition and, implicitly, to the obtuseness and self-seeking by which they are engendered and perpetuated. He is concerned neither with "sinister threats" to this or that nor with emergencies but with genuine problems; and problems call not for antidotes or fire-fighting techniques, but for recognition, formulation, and the process of rational inquiry which, however agonizingly slow, is their only mode of solution. If one insists on locating an "affirmative" side to Szilard's exposure of folly, it lies in his advocacy of a principle as simple—and, at present, as remote—as the rule of reason.

What this book principally achieves is, I think, powerfully suggested by a passage in the title-story:

A politician is a man who thinks he is in possession of the truth and knows what needs to be done; thus his only problem is to persuade people to do what needs to be done. Scientists rarely think that they are in full possession of the truth, and a scientist's aim in a discussion with his colleagues is not to persuade but to clarify. It was clarification rather than persuasion that we needed in the past to arrive at the solution of the great scientific problems.²

I cannot help thinking that the greatest satirists share something of the character Szilard attributes to the scientists. They employ their unusual art not in the service of that persuasion which leads only to uncritical conviction but to produce the unsettling condition of curiosity which leads to inquiry. This, perhaps, is why, in *The Voice of the Dolphins*, a distinguished scientist has written distinguished satire.

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² P. 26.

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Life, Death and The Law. By NORMAN ST. JOHN-STEVAS. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961. Pp. 375. \$5.95.

The sub-title of this book is "Law and Christian Morals in England and the United States." Problems of life and death are of course prime areas in which to study the relation of law and morals. The first problems chosen relate to life's inception: artificial insemination, contraception, and sterilization; the last two deal with acceleration of death: suicide and euthanasia. Homosexuality is sandwiched in between, presumably because this problem has sparked much controversy about the relation between law and morals.

St. John-Stevas writes as a British Roman Catholic and invokes the spirit of Lord Acton, hoping to resolve in some measure the tension between the traditions of Catholicism and of English liberalism. He deals ably and candidly with the contemporary ambivalence of Catholicism towards religious liberty. He brands as "crude impudence" the view that religious toleration is merely a temporary expedient to be abandoned when Catholic majorities make feasible the use of state power to check the propagation of error.¹ He summarizes the liberal views of Maritain and Fr. John Courtney Murray and sees support for them in the 1953 address of Pius XII to Italian jurists: "The duty of repressing moral and religious error . . . must be subordinate to *higher and more general norms*, which in *some circumstances*, permit and even perhaps seem to indicate as better policy toleration of error in order to promote *a greater good*."² St. John-Stevas concedes that this statement "leaves a num-

¹ P. 26.

² P. 27.