

THANK-OFFERING TO BRITAIN FUND LECTURE

THE LION AND THE OSTRICH

By ARTHUR KOESTLER

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THE title of this talk needs perhaps a word of explanation. Ten years ago, *Encounter* magazine invited me to act as a guest editor for a special issue devoted to the state of Britain. The cover design of that issue displayed the familiar coat of arms but with a slight difference: the unicorn had been replaced by an ostrich. The reason for this innovation was explained in the Preface as follows:

In Greek mythology, a chimera is a monster with a lion's head, a goat's trunk and a serpent's tail. The Englishman strikes one as a much more attractive hybrid between a lion and an ostrich. In times of emergency he rises magnificently to the occasion. In between emergencies he buries his head in the sand with the tranquil conviction that Reality is a dirty word invented by foreigners. This attitude is not only soothing, but also guarantees that a new emergency will soon arise and provide a new opportunity for turning into a lion and rising magnificently to the occasion.

To dwell on these leonine qualities would be considered embarrassing and in bad taste, even in a thank-offering lecture. One may nevertheless be permitted to speculate on the course history would have taken if, after Dunkirk, the lion had lost its moral fibre. In all probability, Europe would still be ruled either by Gauleiters or by Commissars, its élite purged, its resisters liquidated, its culture obliterated, its identity lost.

On the other hand, it seems equally probable that if the lion's alter ego had not kept its head buried in the sand during the years from Hitler's invasion of the Rhineland until well after Munich, the war could either have been avoided or won at incomparably smaller cost in human lives—and without delivering Eastern Europe into the hands of a rival tyranny.

The responsibility for this tragic failure cannot be laid on one particular Party or social class or clique, although it used to be fashionable to do so. In fact, however, the illusion that sweet reasonableness can be a substitute for defensive preparedness was shared by the majority of the nation; and the policy

of appeasement was based on that illusion—although in the Labour Party it went under the name of pacifism and was wrapped in anti-Fascist slogans. I recently came across a moving speech by Mr. Attlee, delivered on 11 March 1935, in the House of Commons in protest against the Government's proposal of a modest increase in rearmaments. When he suggested 'disbanding the national armies' as a bright idea to save peace, he was interrupted by shouts of 'Tell that to Hitler', which he calmly brushed aside as irrelevant.

Thus burying one's head in the sand is not a privilege of the ruling class. The old Etonian, we are told, is on his way out, but the Old Struthonian (from *struthio*, Latin for ostrich) is still going strong in all walks of life, in striped trousers or in overalls, in the board-room or the Trade Union office. The results need not be stressed. When the war was over, Britain's prestige in Europe was at an unprecedented height. In less than twenty years it had been all but frittered away. One after the other of the defeated nations celebrated its economic miracle, while the only undefeated country steadily moved—to use that fashionable expression—toward the bottom of the European economic league; and if we are to believe the predictions of the Hoover Institute, this trend still continues. It seems that the ostrich has deprived the lion of his share.

This at least is how post-war history looks when seen through the spectacles of the continental observer. But naturalized Britons have two pairs of spectacles which we wear on alternate days. And when I put on my other pair of glasses—provided by the National Health Service—a rather different picture emerges. But this cannot be conveyed by statistical figures; and since a thank-offering is a personal affair, it may be permissible to indulge in some personal reminiscences.

In November 1940, after the collapse of France, I found myself stranded in Portugal, together with thousands of other refugees, trying to get to England and back into the war. I was, however, a Hungarian national, and those were the days of the blitz and Fifth Column scare, so the Home Office refused to grant me a visa. Nevertheless, with the help of *The Times* correspondent in Lisbon, Walter Lucas, and the passive connivance of the British Consul General, Sir Henry King, I was able to board a plane bound for England without an entry permit. On arrival at Bristol I was promptly arrested and did a stretch of six weeks in Pentonville Prison as an illegal entrant, until my bona fides was established. The day after I was released,

I went to the recruiting office, and was told that it would take a couple of months until my turn came to be called up. I used this interval to write a book on the collapse of France; when the call-up order arrived I needed just another fortnight to finish it. So my publisher, old Jonathan Cape, wrote to the Recruiting Office asking whether it would be possible to obtain a deferment. The answer he received deserves to be quoted in full:

No. 3 CENTRE
LONDON RECRUITING DIVISION
DUKE'S ROAD, W.C.1.
EUSTON 5741

12th February, 1941

Jonathan Cape Esq.
30 Bedford Square
W.C.1.

re Arthur Koestler

I am in receipt of your letter of the 11th instant contents of which have been noted.

As requested, I am therefore postponing Mr. Koestler's calling up, and would suggest that he calls at this Centre when he is at liberty to join His Majesty's Forces.

Illegible signature

Major

A.R.C.

When I read this memorable document, I was more than ever convinced that England must lose the war. Subsequent experiences in the Army did little to dispel this impression. I was assigned to the Pioneer Corps—the only branch of the Forces then open to non-allied aliens—to 'Dig for Victory' as the posters invitingly said. My company—the 251 Company Aliens Pioneer Corps—was engaged on a fairly vital defence job to protect the petrol reservoirs in the vicinity of Bristol. (We were digging craters which, during air-raids, were filled with inflammable liquid and set ablaze to convince the raiders that they had accomplished their mission and could safely go home.) We were glad to do a useful job, but as you would expect from aliens, we became over-enthusiastic, so we asked our Commanding Officer (who was British) to do away with the ritual tea breaks—which, what with downing tools, marching to the distant cook-hut and back morning and afternoon, cost nearly two hours of our working time, in addition to the lunch

break. The C.O. expressed his appreciation of our laudable zeal and explained that we had to have our tea breaks whether we liked it or not because the British Pioneer Companies and the local unions of our civilian work-mates would raise hell if we didn't. The time was about nine months after Dunkirk.

But then, unlike us, our British work-mates were in no hurry because they could never for a moment consider the possibility that the war could be lost. The idea just did not enter their heads. There are apparently situations when the ostrich becomes an indispensable partner of the lion.

I remember some touching episodes. I had to spend a few days in a military hospital somewhere in Gloucestershire, and asked for permission to use my typewriter. The sister in charge of the ward, a kind, middle-aged spinster, who had never before come across a British soldier with an accent like mine, listened to my request, thought for a while, then said: 'All right, you can have your typewriter, but on one condition: you must give me your word of honour that you won't do any Fifth Column work on it.'

Most of our cosmopolitan bunch in 251 Company came across similar experiences, which delighted us; they made us feel that such holy innocence had an unconquerable quality. But other experiences left us rather bewildered. While digging for victory, we came into intimate contact with working-class life, and found it fundamentally different from its continental equivalents. In the NAAFI canteens, in the pub and later at the snooker table in a London ambulance station, I was taught to accept the stubborn persistence of the hoary cliché that people in general were divided into Them and Us. But that 'Us' had nothing to do with class-consciousness in the Marxist sense, as it existed in the Socialist and Communist Parties of Europe. Marxist dialectics was as much double-dutch to the British working-class as it was to the rest of the nation; instead of the fierce class-hatred which had scorched the Continent with revolutions and civil wars, there was an almost smug acceptance of living in a divided world, as licensed premises are divided into saloon bar and public bar. On the Continent, the symbolic gesture of militancy was the clenched fist; here it was closer to a shrug, a deliberate turning of one's back on middle-class standards of value, codes of behaviour, vocabulary and accent. Off duty our working mates were lively characters, full of fun and games; on the working site they moved like figures in a slow-motion film, or deep-sea divers on the ocean bed. They

seemed to be conforming to a sacred doctrine, a set of un-written maxims of life: go slow and take it easy or you are letting your mates down and we shall all be on the dole. It's a mug's game, anyway, and you are in it for life unless you hit the pools. In the Libyan desert, or as rear-gunners in a bomber, they would have done a magnificent job; for in those circumstances the gulf would have been temporarily bridged by shared danger and hardship—and by the awareness of playing a man's game instead of a mug's game. The same lovable bloke who risked his life on D-Day to keep the country free would not lift a finger at Dagenham to put the country back on its feet.

It may seem to you that I am flogging a dead horse, but to pronounce it dead does not make it so—or else this particular dead horse still has a vicious kick. 'The most striking conclusion,' Geoffrey Gorer wrote a few years ago, reviewing a book on the life of coal miners, 'the most striking conclusion is, how remarkably little high wages and secure employment have modified old habits and ways of life.' It is of course true that the advent of the welfare state, of the TV set and the washing machine provided the upper strata of the working-class with some of the external trappings of middle-class life; the frontiers between Disraeli's two nations are no longer impenetrable; gifted young people of working-class origin cross the lines in increasing numbers, while the rebellious children of the bourgeoisie imitate proletarian habits and attitudes. Yet for the bulk of the population the frontier nevertheless persists, separating two overlapping but distinct cultures, each with a different image of itself. On the one side, the complex social pyramid of the middle and upper-classes with its intricate sub-divisions, but with certain basic aspirations and values in common, which range from confused notions of gracious living to the glorification of the rat race and of the joys of suburbia; its motto could be: 'Compete, Compute, Commute'—the contemporary version of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. The other side will have none of it. As Professor Tom Burns wrote some years ago in an article with the significant title 'The Cold Class War': 'Competition for jobs, for promotion or privileged positions—the serious concerns of the middle-class adult, are disapproved of . . .' In other words, the British working-class seems to have become a powerful non-competitive enclave in a competitive world. To appreciate the contrast, compare John Braine's *Room at the Top* to Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

You will have noticed that I am once more looking at the scenery through my murky continental spectacles. Seen through native lenses, the apparent erosion of the class-barriers since the war does indeed look impressive; it is reflected in the self-consciously classless attitudes of the new generation of students, in the regional accents put on by performers on the mass-media or in the deliberately vulgar appeal of commercial advertisements. They all seem over-anxious to demonstrate that we have moved into the age of the common man. Some of these attitudes are flagrantly bogus, while others may be genuine reflections of the changing socio-cultural climate—but you cannot get around the fact that in this industrial age the decisive test is the state of industrial relations, and the ultimate testing ground is the shop floor. And in this respect, putting on continental spectacles is again useful, because they reveal that British social history since the end of the war differs fundamentally from that of other European countries. During the early post-war period in Italy and France the Communist Party was the strongest single force both in the Trade Unions *and* in Parliament, and both countries seemed on the verge of civil war. But the rising curve of prosperity led to a corresponding decline in revolutionary fervour; moreover, on the Continent there exist Socialist, Communist, and Christian unions which compete for the workers' favours; and their openly declared political programmes are massively represented in Parliament, so that Trade Union politics have become a truly democratic game. In this country events seem to have moved in the opposite direction: militancy in the Unions has increased instead of decreasing with growing prosperity, with a tendency to harden into the kind of cold class war where passive majorities are led by active minorities dedicated to ideologies which cannot muster even a single elected representative in Parliament. This is a strangely paradoxical state of affairs in the oldest democracy of the world; it contributes to the industrial malaise and plays a significant part in its poor showing in the European league. But it is rarely ventilated in public debate; a Struthonian attitude is considered more appropriate, particularly by progressive middle-class intellectuals haunted by guilt—as reflected in Mark Boxer's *Times* cartoons.

If one tries to dig down to the roots of both the psychological malaise and our recurrent economic misadventures, another paradox emerges. In his Preface to the English translation of *Das Kapital*, Engels wrote in 1886 that Marx, 'after a life-long

study of the economic history and conditions of England', had been 'led to the conclusion that, at least in Europe, England is the only country where the inevitable social revolution might be effected entirely by peaceful and legal means'. One of the reasons for this belief was, he explained, that the British bourgeoisie, instead of stringing up the aristocrats on lamp posts, married their daughters, and thus gave rise to a dynamic upper middle-class in which feudal traditions became amalgamated with the mercantilism of the new entrepreneurs. The natives of the Continent experienced a series of violent social revolutions in 1789, 1848, 1918, and 1945, which abolished or blurred traditional class distinctions and restructured the whole social edifice. Britain was spared these bloody upheavals, as it was spared foreign invasions, and was able to preserve the continuity of its traditions, institutions, and social structure. But it had to pay a price for this immunity. Stability led to complacency and stagnation, which made itself felt in every domain of life, from an outdated system of education, to the ancient guild structure of Britain's Trade Unions, as unique in the Western World as its weights, measures, and currency were until recently. Seen through British eyes, continental history was a permanent mess, from Robespierre through Lenin to Hitler, with flames bursting out of the roof every now and then. Seen through continental eyes, the Englishman's proverbial castle was crumbling with dry rot. Somewhere between these two dramatized images lies the truism that islands used to be different—but no longer are.

This state of transition is manifest in the islanders' ambivalent attitude to the mainland. In the past, the decline and fall of Empires was an ugly, chaotic event; for the first time in history, this generation saw an Empire dissolve with a certain dignity and grace. But when it came to opting for the logical alternative based on the new geopolitical realities, the ostrich once more raised its ruffled tail. In 1948 a whole continent cheered Ernest Bevin's sonorous pronouncement: 'Europe must unite or perish.' Yet for the next fifteen years it looked as if successive British governments did their level best to promote the second alternative. In 1950, when Britain was invited to join in the European Coal and Steel Community, we refused; in subsequent years, as Europe's economic integration was gathering momentum, and repeated attempts were made to secure our participation, we again refused. It turned out to be an expensive miscalculation. Yet on various occasions British

delegates took up an attitude which reminded one of Molotov's famous *net*, vetoing UNO resolutions. De Gaulle's trenchant *non* in 1963 is still remembered; but the events that led up to it are forgotten; while the erstwhile flag-bearers of socialist internationalism have become a rearguard of insularity, irresistibly reminding one of the citizens of *Animal Farm* who no longer know whether two legs are good, four legs better, or vice versa.

Thus there is no end to the paradoxes which this country can produce to surprise the world. The nineteen-sixties were a decade of recurrent economic crises, but also of unprecedented cultural euphoria. While the editorialists of *Le Monde* and *Die Welt* sadly shook their heads and whispered about the sick man of Europe, *Time* magazine published an enthusiastic cover story about swinging London. Industrial exports were in a sorry state, but mini-skirts and the Beatles conquered the world. Carnaby Street became a centre of tourist pilgrimage as the Tower of London had once been. The decline of the pound coincided with an upsurge of *joie de vivre*; the sick man became the trend-setter of Europe.

How is one to explain such a paradox? If one were to take a jaundiced view, one might call it an up-to-date, trendy manner of burying one's head in the sand—or deafening one's ears with discoteque rock. Alternatively one might regard it as a bloodless rebellion against traditions gone stale; or against the rat-race of competing, computing, and commuting; or, more melodramatically, as a reaction to existential despair. We can take our choice among these and other interpretations; personally I believe that within a few years the flashier aspects of this scene will have vanished like a set on a revolving stage, without leaving any lasting trace. But there are other aspects of contemporary culture, rarely discussed, which may indeed have a lasting effect. A few weeks ago the Press came out with the remarkable disclosure that—I am quoting the *Daily Telegraph's* headline—'British Teachers are the Worst-Paid in Europe'. The reports were based on a survey by a market research group associated with Manchester University, and showed that in Britain an average secondary school teacher aged forty-five earned, after tax and other deductions, £1,760 a year; while his German equivalent netted £3,700; his Belgian colleague £3,300, the Dutchman £3,050, the Frenchman £2,700. Only the Italian schoolmaster, with a net earning of £1,600, earned £70 less than the Englishman. But even the Italian was better

paid at the start of his career than his British colleague. Particularly relevant is the fact that the young teacher in Italy started with a salary 10 per cent *higher* than the average industrial worker, whereas in Britain he started at 25 per cent *lower*. The National Association of Schoolmasters commented: 'Unless we are to become the peasants of Western Europe, a radical revaluation of teachers' pay is imperative.'

One does not need to put on one's continental spectacles to consider this situation as symbolic of the persistence of Struthonian attitudes. A schoolmaster in London's dockland, Mr. Ralph Samuels, remarked: 'When you tell anybody you're a teacher, you can see in their eyes that they think you must be either mad or incapable of getting a really decent job.'¹ This is not just a question of money—although the contrast between continental and British salaries speaks for itself—but of the teacher's social status, and of the general attitude to education—its purpose, methods, priorities, and its place in the general scheme of things. Above all, there is the delicate yet basic problem how to reconcile the abstract ideal of equal educational opportunities for all with the hard realities of a social structure in which class-distinctions are being slowly eroded but are still strongly and resentfully felt, and are reflected in the glaring inequalities between one type of school and another.

This brings me, through only a slight digression, to my favourite hobby-horse—though you may consider that too a dead horse, if I may mix my metaphors. I mean that, regardless of all optimistic assertions to the contrary, people still take it for granted that a person's social background can be instantly identified by the way he manipulates his vocal chords and oral cavities (unless he has a Hungarian accent, which puts him into a classless limbo). Most Englishmen, however enlightened, are frankly incredulous when you try to convince them that in France, for instance, some regional patois apart, the vocabulary and pronunciation of the concierge or *femme de ménage*—the equivalent of our Mrs. Mop—is indistinguishable from that of the lady whom she serves, and that the old jokes about dropped aitches were an exclusively English speciality. The cause of the difference lies of course mainly in the educational system which in France is essentially uniform, based on competitive selection, where rank and privilege confer only marginal advantages; access to the two pinnacles of learning, the *École Normale Supérieure* and the *École Polytechnique* is exclusively based on the

¹ Quoted by John Montgomery, *The Fifties* (Allen & Unwin, 1965), p. 62.

candidates' merits. As already said, the affectations of middle-class youngsters acquiring working-class accents and attitudes, or the synthetically classless BBC English strike one as no more than inverted snobbery—which merely proves that one cannot escape becoming a snob of *some* sort in England any more than getting sun-tanned in Majorca.

There is, however, one particular type of snobbery that one cannot help admiring—the British contempt for over-efficiency, for German *Tüchtigkeit*; the refusal to become hypnotized by growth for growth's sake; and the quiet conviction—or illusion—that Britain is Greece to the Romans across the Channel. If carried too far, this attitude helps to hatch more ostriches; nevertheless it has its strong attraction in defending the place of value in a world of facts. It is after all a remarkable phenomenon that the popularity of the Earls Court Motor Show has not diminished the popularity of the Chelsea Flower Show. Rolls Royce may be in the doldrums, but we keep the aspidistra flying.

* * *

The late Cecil Day Lewis once wrote these lines, which stuck in my memory:

Traveller, know / I am here to show / Your own divided heart.

I have tried to give you a glimpse into the divided heart of that contradiction in terms, the naturalized Briton. Yet if you come to think of it, to be born as a British citizen requires neither effort nor an act of choice; to become one requires both. And, reverting once more to snobbery, I can boast of a rather unique education, for my prep-school was Pentonville, and the Pioneer Corps my Eton. If, even after thirty years in this country, I still sometimes feel as a stranger among its natives, the moment I set foot on the Continent, I feel British to the bone.

Frequently I am asked by one of my disgruntled native friends why, having once lived in sunnier climes, I choose to live in this country with its foul weather, indifferent food, greedy tax collectors, and bitchy book reviewers. I have tried to answer that question in an autobiographical book, though the answer, I am afraid, is not very original: like many continentals of a similar background and history,

I have found the human climate of this country particularly congenial and soothing—a kind of Davos for bruised veterans of the age of Hitler and Stalin. When all is said, its atmosphere still contains fewer germs

of aggression and brutality per cubic foot in a crowded bus, pub or queue than in any other country in which I have lived.

My late friend, George Orwell, expressed this feeling much better when he wrote about

England's crowds with their mild, knobby faces, their bad teeth and gentle manners, this nation of flower-lovers and stamp collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts players and crossword-puzzle fans . . .

And here you have the ultimate paradox of the naturalized Briton: he starts his pilgrim's progress by admiring the lion and ends up by discovering that he has grown rather fond of that preposterous ostrich.