Mind Over Matter

Charles Burton Marshall

The German invasion stalled short of Moscow. There the Soviet Army seized the offensive for the first time. Hitler confided to top generals an apprehension of the unattainability of victory. Full industrial mobilization for a long war was decreed in Germany. Pearl Harbor was attacked, and Germany’s hostilities and Asia’s fused into global war. The Nazi rulership moved from harassment and expulsion to systematic slaughter of Europe’s Jews.

That momentous two-month sequence in 1941-42—no one can see an end to the interacting effects—concludes the time span focused upon in John Lukacs’s "The Last European War: September 1939/December 1941" (Anchor/Doubleday; 562 pp.; $15.00). The first portion details the main events of the initial, basically European, and—in Lukacs’s plausible estimate—decisive phase of what became the Second World War. The balance of the book concerns matters more impalpable—what happened to people’s norms, thoughts, and general character, the modes of state conduct, and the sentiments of nations. The author’s flair and meticulous care in handling an "immense and ungovernable" volume of source materials are commendable. What will draw me back for many rereadings is the portion exhibiting his gifts (demonstrated in his earlier "Historical Consciousness and The Passing of the Modern Age") for pondering history’s deeper reasons and significances.

A speech Hitler made seven months before the triggering of war prefigured the resort to genocide. The threat was contingent upon recurrence of world war. The intent was, by making hostages of Europe’s Jews, to dissuade U.S. entry into the then prospective hostilities. In the Nazis’ fell logic the threat of extermination, having failed as a deterrent, had to be carried out to punish the Jews, who were perceived as the instigators of world war.

Hitler’s complicity in the specific decision, while never documented, can scarcely be doubted. What Lukacs calls "the most monstrous" of Hitler’s malefactions was contradictory to his hope, from late 1941 on, to mitigate defeat by convincing opponents of Germany’s insurmountable toughness, by rending their coalition, and finally by compelling "the Russians or, preferably, the Anglo-Americans...to negotiate peace with a great Germany still largely puissant and intact."

German technology, outdoing German generalship, performed the necessary feats of production. The extermination program, however, precluded any deal with the Reich’s Western enemies. In turn, that circumstance nullified all incentive for the Soviet Union to stop short of deploying forces into Central Europe. Having launched war in every direction, Hitler’s will could no longer end it. For Germany every escape from utter defeat was blocked.

Lukacs describes Hitler’s mind as "a very powerful instrument" and warns against the error of deducing "from his awesome defects of the heart that he was wanting in insight or intelligence." Discounting the rant and carpet-chewing, Lukacs observes: "What was frightening in his character was his cold and almost inhuman detachment." Yet after 1941 Hitler was slow to comprehend his and Germany’s predicament. His once notable perceptiveness had declined, just as his boldness had deteriorated into imprudence. The distinction is basic. Boldness accepts risks, imprudence is disdainful of consequences. A good mountain climber is necessarily bold but never imprudent.

Hitler far outdid Napoleon in the range of his designs and transient triumphs and in the depth of his eventual failure. His character comes off far less favorably than Napoleon’s. Lukacs, honoring Lord Acton’s instruction to do one’s best for the other side, mentions, besides acuity, the man’s bravery and his occasional generosity to close associates as traits to offset culpability. The unequivocal nature of the German debacle and the recollected repugnance of the Fuehrer’s character are what count in the lingering effects on the zeitgeist.

Because Hitler and his malign movement were antidemocratic, any despot feels compelled now to avow democracy, probably with some qualifier attached. National Socialism was dogmatically authoritarian, and so the flout of authority is de rigueur in Europe and elsewhere. Nazidom’s doctrines rejected equality, so egalitarianism now approaches the status of a political absolute. The explicit monstrosity of the Nazis’ genocidal crimes provides a degree of immunity to reproach for regimes whose complications, though no less reprehensible, have been of a distinguishable sort. However revolutionary a figure he was, general understanding placed Hitler on the right wing. Accordingly, certain psychological benefits accrue to the left, which now enjoys a moral advantage distinctly at variance with its disfavored standing in political competition and intellectual acceptance before the Second World War.

Yet a rehabilitation of Marxism in reaction to the Hitler experience—so Lukacs argues—is scarcely consistent with the lessons inherent in the rise and fall of Nazidom. "The influence of mind over matter, the intrusion of mind into the structure of events are there for anyone who wishes to see," Lukacs writes. "We have many evidences of it in 1939-41....The history of those years abounds with examples suggesting the very opposite of what Marx had been preaching and of what is still the accepted basis of what goes on under the name of modern social science: that what people were thinking..."
economic situation, the superstructure of economic realities."

Hitler's enormous successes stemmed from "a conviction of German superiority, a conviction that he succeeded to impart to the minds of millions." Yet moral imperatives were what finally rallied opponents in Europe. "In 1940 the best did not lack all conviction, even when the worst may have been full of passionate intensity." Lukács calls that thought "the lesson—perhaps the only inspiring lesson"—of the war.

Lukács's ideas about the transcendency of spirit are good, up to a point. He overdoes, I believe, censuring the Western Allies for lacking "the determination, or the will, to invade Europe fast enough or wide enough." A cross-Channel invasion while the Germans and the Russians were still entangled far to the east probably would have foreclosed much misfortune, but want of will or determination was not really what prevented such a move onto the Continent in 1942 or 1943. The primary obstacles in those years to an amphibious operation of the scope and propulsion required to produce other than a debacle were a complex of obdurate material circumstances. The Normandy landings, coming only two and a half years after Pearl Harbor, were a prodigious achievement. To have tried sooner would have been to substitute imprudence for boldness. I do not know of a surer way of gumming up the conduct of war.

The Savage in Literature
by Brian V. Street
(Routledge and Kegan Paul; 207 pp.; $18.00)

Martin Green

English literature has been deeply concerned with empire for four centuries. As Anthony Burgess said the other day, the imperial adventure has been our one big subject. It is in many ways a misfortune that our most serious school of literary criticism (F.R. Leavis's) has found literary significance exclusively in a kind of moral realism associated with domestic and personal relations. One might say, paradoxically, that Jane Austen and George Eliot's subject matter was morally unrealistic in nineteenth-century England. But no one saw that, Mr. Street quotes the anthropologist Andrew Lang, who talked in 1891 of a new "exotic literature" whose writers "have at least seen new worlds for themselves; have gone out of the streets of the over-populated lands into the open air." Lang preferred these writers, but he saw their work as romance, as opposed to realism. In fact, however, out there in the open air the serious history of the times was being made. John Buchan and Rider Haggard were after all administrators of the empire; they knew what was going on; just as our contemporary thriller-writers, like Ian Fleming and Graham Greene—not to mention Howard Hunt—have worked in espionage. What we call romance is written by those who know how the world is run; what we call realism is written by those who don't; and the reason is that our sense of the real cannot encompass the facts of our lives. That is one reason for looking again at the novel of adventure.

Within this subject Mr. Street chose a fascinating division—"the representation of primitive society in English fiction 1858-1920," to quote his subtitle. In fact, however, he largely confines himself to popular fiction, popular as opposed to serious, and makes very few references even to Conrad. One guesses that he was scared off by the problems of interpreting books that have been so portentously named and claimed by literary critics. That is a pity, for in fact writers such as Conrad and Wells answer to exactly the same analysis as do Buchan and Haggard and Kipling; and that fact is of great interest and importance to the theory of literature. However, that particular opportunity Mr. Street has left to others.

It is also too bad that he turned away from the exploration of the writers' political incentives. I do not, of course, imply that popular authors were in any sense hired to write books of adventure in promotion of British imperialism. They wrote spontaneously, but their spontaneity had a political bearing. Imperialism and its adventures were a pervasive excitement in the English air (how dead that air feels now without it), and writers naturally sought and found stories that answered to that theme.

The "ethnographic" novel is said to start its popular career with G.A. Henty's With Kitchener in the Sudan (1874). But Mr. Street concerns himself instead with the influence of scientific (anthropological) ideas on that fiction, on the ground that those ideas were formed before the fever of political imperialism took hold. This too is a pity, because it involves defining politics and empire very narrowly. England had been in the grip of that excitement since Elizabeth's time, and those "scientific" ideas were, another of its products, its formulas of faith. We need some terms that will subsume "politics" and "science." But the subject is so new and manifold that these blinkers Mr. Street put on himself perhaps helped him to make some sort of order.

He is most interesting, as one would expect, on Henry Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs, the purveyors of scientific myths in popular form, the manipulators of science in justification of white supremacy. Kipling and John Buchan manipulated literature in a rather similar way, although Mr. Street is not interested in that. But I think a comparison and contrast is worth making. Let me give an example from Buchan, since Kipling's skills in this line are already well known. The hero of Prester John says of one of his escapes: "'Behind me was heathendom and the black fever flats. In front were the cool mountains and the bright streams and the guns of my own folk.'" And he quotes: "'Night's candles are burned out....'" But besides Shakespeare, just count the echoes of Bunyan and the Bible, and the pictorial echoes of Scott and Borrow and a thousand nature writers, all invoked to give imperialism its literary legitimacy, its Englishness, its cultural inevitability. Then Mr. Street is