

The Robot Mentality

The 25th Hour. By C. Virgil Gheorghiu.
Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1966.
404pp. \$6.50.

THE first time I read this book it had just appeared in Paris, some eighteen years ago. The Western world had newly been awakened from its pro-Communist slumber by Victor Kravchenko, the Russian engineer who had fled the Soviet Union and made sensational revelations in his best-seller, *I Chose Freedom*. Before the publication of Kravchenko's book (five years before Whitaker Chambers' *Witness*), the average newspaper reader believed the comfortable illusion that concentration camps and the methods of dictators had been invented by Hitler and buried with him. Kravchenko, with only the untrained pen of a non-professional writer, revealed the truth that concentration camps were first employed (if indeed forms of evil have any other inventor than Satan) by the Russian Communists; Khrushchev was later to confirm it at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956. The implication then was that these "methods" would remain with us only so long as the Communist system itself, with its basis in terror, oppression and extermination.

The next decade and a half produced innumerable books by victims of Nazis and/or Communists. I use and/or because quite a few of the authors had the misfortune to serve time under both systems, for example Frau Buber-Neumann, wife of a leading Ger-

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man Communist, who was thrown into a Stalinist concentration camp after her husband was purged, then (in 1940) handed over to Hitler's institution. Wife of a Jew, she happened to be a non-Jewish, Prussian woman; she and dozens of Jews were delivered by Stalin to Hitler, no doubt as a friendly seal on their alliance.

Gheorghiu's book was not only one of the first to describe a similar, although strictly speaking fictional, adventure. It also went beyond the usual horror stories about camps, tortures and persecution. In fact, it went beyond Hitler, even Stalin, and sought the key to the phenomenon of camps in the modern robot mentality. Not that *The 25th Hour* is a distinctly great book; Gheorghiu is not better than average a writer, but he is a rather good and sensitive journalist tying together stereotyped situations and pulling the strings of largely stereotyped people to the extent needed for intellectual speculation.

Moreover, as in his two or three other novels, Gheorghiu has a naturally morbid way of looking at the world. In his latest work, *The Immortals of Agapia*, set in his familiar Rumanian milieu, the subject is a crime story, but the style reminds one of an awkward tragedian imitating Aeschylus, heavy with the burden of fate and human submission.

Yet, even at the second reading of *The 25th Hour* I became as absorbed in the book as the first time. This, despite the interval between the two occasions, an interval filled with reading a considerable amount of "concentration camp" literature. When I first read the book, in 1949, I, like many others, saw it as a record of past events, interesting as a case history of horrible happenings now definitely behind us. The reason for my renewed interest at the recent reading is my awareness that the literature of the *univers concentrationnaire* (a label applied in France where they conceptualize everything) drew limited, therefore unwarranted conclusions.

The authors sought out the easily popular connection between the camps and the de-personalizing techniques of dictatorships, although it is now every day more evident that such techniques are by no means linked to Nazism or Communism only.

IN THE average book on Nazism or Communism, next to the images of persecution there is the contrapuntal theme of a free and democratic way of life as offered by more humanely organized societies. The tacit suggestion is that the oppressive regime is a mere temporary thing, and that its grim features will be erased by internal liberalization and external containment. The underlying thesis is thus George Kennan's, who noted with genuine astonishment (in *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin*) that such horrors as produced by Communism should not have taken place in our times. He meant, of course, our "definitively enlightened" times.

The writer Gheorghiu is much less astonished than Kennan, the political expert. He does not see this century's totalitarianism as a mere interlude, an unfortunate interference with an otherwise steady Progress. While he leads his characters through tragi-comic situations in Stalin-land and Hitler-land, he also describes another, growing and conquering, empire: that of the coming robot. In this endeavor only Franz Kafka preceded him—with more talent but far less documentation.

In Ernst Jünger's early work, *Der Arbeiter*, the hero is the standardized proletarian for whom the supreme liberty is a total and mechanical integration into the interminable chain of wars to come. This and similar figures must have danced before Gheorghiu's eyes as he wrote his story of post-freedom Man. His chief sufferers, the peasant Ion Moritz and the poet Traian Koruga, are still transitional figures. This is natural, since our authors and their readers are not robots themselves: they still cannot write and read novels exclusively of robots (this becomes increasingly questionable!), they must still smuggle in a Candide-like little man who, precisely because he is at every step duped, represents normalcy. A rather shrunk normalcy, just enough to permit our unbelieving amusement at the surprises awaiting the peasant and the poet.

The first is a simple man who never understands the tale of chance and cruelty in which he plays the chief role. Successively tagged

a Jew in Rumania, a Rumanian secret agent in Budapest, a Hungarian slave worker in Germany, a model Aryan in an SS camp, finally a numbered card in the filing system of the US military administration—Ion Moritz suffers torture, starvation and loss of family. But the real fascination of his story is that he remains naive and credulous throughout. Not like Candide to whom reviewers have likened him, for this popular hero of Voltaire's philosophical tale is merely the mouthpiece for a thesis and thus overplays his role. Ion Moritz has a mind of his own, a peasant's good sense and sensitivity. He also possesses a commiserating heart and



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a tranquil courage. The author's point is that exactly such men—normal, average—are caught unaware by this century "of the common man." How could Ion Moritz understand that other men have made decisions for him in the name of ideologies or mechanical efficiency or racial and social theories?

Does his brother-in-fate, the poet Traian Koruga, understand it better? A brilliant mind and a great novelist, he is not caught unaware, he long ago sensed the pulse of his epoch. His theory is that we live in mankind's twenty-fifth hour, beyond the hour of hope. We are slaves of the machine, whether in the brutal Soviet system or the

hypocritical American civilization. Man has become a number in both, the only difference being that the materially poorer Russians lodge their numbered slaves in filth, while the richer Americans use insecticide and psychological services. On neither side is there regard for the person nor charity for his soul. The book's ending is recognizably Orwellian: the third world war begins between the two super-systems. The lucid Traian walks into the camp's forbidden zone and is shot by the guards; Ion Moritz, reunited with his family for exactly eighteen hours (just time enough to make love tearfully to his wife), departs us as a confused and resigned crusader.

ONE may have two possible reactions before this novel, and the trouble is that we are becoming increasingly undecided between which should be ours. One is that Ion Moritz stands for all of us: man in history, usually crushed by fantastic forces, but often also escaping from them. He can do so mainly by fighting oppression, fleeing, protesting with his last gasp. In this case, Traian Koruga's pessimism and suicide, his lucidity even, would seem unwarranted. It was indeed unusual around 1950 to find no difference between the two "camps" on either side of the Iron Curtain. As Arthur Koestler, certainly no right-winger, wrote at the time, both "systems" may be unjust, but as limited human beings we must still opt for the less unjust of the two, the West, "the Americans."

Today, however, Koruga's choice—and possibly ours—while still reprehensible, might be better understood. We (I mean the planet) are becoming one single camp of numbered robots, dwellers in an immense filing cabinet. The institutions which have made us historically free—Churches, parliaments, law courts, universities—even the arts which taught us respect for form, are in the 24th hour of dissolution. The remedy offered, "participatory democracy" and "free choice" at life's super-market, is itself a symptom of shamelessness and incomprehension since it suggests that we take more of the stuff that has been poisoning us.

Koruga saw indeed far: when the world becomes uniform, it matters little whether people live divided or under one government: the regime is impersonal despotism. Only the bureaucrat flourishes as he sits near the source of power: the filing cabinet.

HOWEVER, it would be unjust to leave the impression that we endorse either this pessimism or this doubt about the correct choice. There are better ways than Traian Koruga's to be lucid, and they are not necessarily those of Virgil Gheorghiu's either. It is questionable, for example, whether Gheorghiu has thought through his thesis consistently. His poet's conversations and monologues are interspersed with italicized passages lifted from texts by well-known personalities of past and present, Lao-tse, Count Keyserling, F.S.C. Northrop, Jawaharlal Nehru, and others. Since Koruga represents the refined Old-World intellectual, it is not surprising that the men whose mouthpiece he is are themselves representatives of the humanistic view of life.

Is Gheorghiu aware that through some of its essential features this humanism is directly responsible for concentration camps, totalitarian systems of government, even for the emergence of robots? That the pessimism of the 25th hour is the offspring of Renaissance and Enlightenment optimism? That philosophies looking for the key to a happy and "dis-alienated" mankind end by eliminating happiness and ruthlessly enforcing cohesion?

Clearly, Gheorghiu ignores these casual connections, and therefore when he laments we can only shrug our shoulders. He sees farther than a George Kennan, but not far enough; little wonder he sees no alternative: he still approves the means which have led to the end of the 24th hour, when already the 25th strikes.

For us, it is neither the 24th, nor the 25th hour, it is ordinary human time. We do not seek the unerring instruments of happiness, not even an infallible protection against the robots. We should not attempt to be humanist angels lest we end up as totalitarian beasts.