

The Treason of the Clerks

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THIRTY YEARS AGO, a book was published about which a great many people talk, but which few have really read: *La Trahison des clercs*, by a belligerent, eccentric, inconsistent, learned, fearless Frenchman of genius, Julien Benda. The American translation of the book was published as *The Treason of the Intellectuals*—lest, perhaps, American readers should think Benda was referring to a conspiracy in Woolworth's. But the Marxist word "intellectual" does not quite express Benda's meaning; nor does the English word "clerk," exactly, even in its medieval signification. Coleridge's word "clerisy" comes nearer to the mark. By *les clercs*, Benda meant those persons of learning and taste, particularly writers and teachers, whose duty in every age it is to preserve the integrity of moral ideals. They may or may not be clerics; they may or may not be professors; but, if true to their calling, they always are guardians of the Truth. In Benda's eyes, the Truth is the Hellenic view of man and nature.

Now a very good book about Benda has been published: Professor Robert J. Neiss's *Julien Benda* (University of Michigan Press, \$6.50.) This is just the sort of book which a university press ought to publish, and its appearance is one of the proofs of the recent reinvigoration of the University of Michigan Press, which had lain dormant for some years. This volume is the best window on twentieth-century French speculation that I know.

Benda, born in 1867, is still in the land of the living; but ever since the publication of this famous book, a generation gone, he has been in eclipse. Mr. Neiss says that not a single American library has a complete collection of Benda's works. *The Treason* itself, however, now is available as an American paperback. The book that made Benda famous also brought him ostracism in many quarters. It is perilous to write a really influential book: envy springs up on every hand.

Now the treason to which Benda referred was the desertion of the twentieth-century clerisy, in Benda's opinion, to the service of the State; for the clerisy should serve Truth, and truth only. The scholar was becoming an ideologue, won over to the adulation of Society by the prospect of power and the lure of creature-comforts; and the State would use the scholar and debase him. (This theme runs through some recent periodical writings of Dr. Thomas Molnar, a European-American philosopher, incidentally, and will reappear in a forthcoming book of Mr. Molnar's which may awake nearly as much controversy in the United States as Benda's book did in France.) In proportion as the intellectual, the scholar, the clerk surrenders himself to the service of the state, his actual influence will diminish, for it is only from his maintaining an anarchic independence that he is able to obtain the respect of the average sensual man. The function of the clerk today is very like the function of the Hebrew

prophets in Israel: to preserve the integrity of ideals in a sensate age, to reprove and guide the kings. For Benda, as Mr. Neiss says, "The true intellectual is a man who feels this call of Idea, who abandons his earthly lusts for the passion of the mind. The true intellectual is Humphrey Davy dancing before his beaker of potassium."

Now there are certain grave difficulties in Benda's position. For one thing, though he denounced scholars of the Right for "giving to party what they owed to mankind" (Goldsmith's reproach against his friend Edmund Burke), commonly Benda was much more tolerant of the tracts for the times published by men of the Left; for Benda himself leaned toward the Left, and himself engaged furiously in political controversies from time to time. For another thing, it really is never prudent for the learned man to cut himself off utterly from the practical consequences of mundane action; as Mr. Neiss writes (and Mr. Neiss, though much an admirer of Benda, is also Benda's keenest critic), "Because he was intoxicated with a system he was led from the beginning into what seems, at least to American eyes, a catastrophic intellectual error, the error of constant generalization without sufficient regard for facts; quite bluntly, the passion for system more than frequently made him 'identify the diverse' to the point where he forgot that diversity is the norm of things, identity their deformation. System, this is to say, barred him from science." (Mr. Neiss, you may perceive, knows his philosophy.)

Fiercely classical and rational in temper of mind, militantly anti-romantic and anti-mystical, Benda represents the Voltaire-Frenchman, not the Rousseau-Frenchman. But Benda himself disdains nationalism and even nationality. The most sorry aspect of the Treason, according to Benda, has been the rallying of twentieth-century intellectuals to the arrogant banner of nationalism, which rejects universal and eternal truth for the sake of national and passing advantage. It ought not to be thought, however, that Benda is anything like a

humanitarian internationalist. A universalist in attitude, yes; but not an internationalist as we have come to know the devotees of the League of Nations and the United Nations. As Mr. Neiss summarizes his view, "It is a favorite device of modern times to seek to maintain international morality by tribunals, commissions, and leagues, but Benda has no faith in any of them. They do not exist, he maintains, because of any deep, popular desire for them, but have been founded on the same principle they are set up to combat, on self-interest, the fear of war."

Although the intellectual should be an anarchic individualist in his personal independence, Benda insists, still his mission is not private, but eternal and universal; and any attachment to self-interest corrupts that mission. The clerk ought not even to marry, for that detracts him from his vocation. If the scholar takes up the cause of race, caste, class, or nation, he is derelict in his duty.

Benda, although principally engaged in assailing the nationalist-intellectuals, was not unaware of the class-conscious intellectuals, like Sorel, who would substitute an unreasoning devotion to an abstract group for the free rational intellect. And though he did not denounce Marx himself as one of the Traitors, still he felt that Marx's ideas and Marx's school were undermining the foundations of Platonic philosophy, the eternal verities which are a philosopher's only proper concern.

Here I have been able only to skim the surface of Benda's analysis of the mission of the scholar; and I have not touched upon the several other important facets of Benda's thought, let alone Mr. Neiss's penetrating criticisms. M. Benda has been passionate in the cause of dispassionate rationality, partisan in the cause of political impartiality, atheistic in the defense of religious truth. He is as bewildering as he is brilliant. Often a careless scholar, he is the most ardent champion of pure scholarship. I do commend to you his *Treason of the Intellectuals*, and, still more, Professor Neiss's sober and lucid criticism.