

The Honest Teacher

Cold Friday, by Whittaker Chambers; edited with an introduction by Duncan Norton-Taylor. *New York: Random House, 1964. xvii+327pp. \$5.95.*

WHITTAKER CHAMBERS had every excuse that others have had for being deceived by the appeal of Communism; perhaps more. But he did not forgive himself for being wrong. And for that the others will never forgive him.

There was much to forgive, or allow for, or criticize in a literary way—self-dramatization, self-pity, slickness, attempts upon heights and depths not accessible to him. All of these things were minor compared to the witness he bore in his one important book, compared to the political parable he had lived and which he re-lived in print as a form of penance and warning. There, the crude poems were part of a record; even the mediocrity of his thinking made him typical of certain currents in the national mood of the twenties, and increased the value of his testimony. His appealingly direct approach to things—(he tells how Mark Van Doren languidly let drop the opinion to his student that the Russian Revolution was not so bad, never dreaming that student would go out and become a Russian agent)—makes him reveal what others would hide about themselves. Chambers, for instance, *admits* that he seized upon news events, when writing at *Time*, as occasions “to justify the ways of God to man.” No doubt others are sophomorically busy at this task right now—and in the service of fairly strange gods, at that. At least Chambers became a press agent for the God who had called on the talents of Moses and Milton.

But in this collection of works-not-in-progress all the man's failings are unredeemed by the spiritual testimony he was born to deliver. Once that task was done—as he himself said—his life was over. To his credit, he refused to acquiesce in his own death. He struggled to write, to find the great philosophy he always felt lurking behind his more specific indictment of the age's false faiths. He cast around desperately for the messiah whose image he thought he had discerned in the Mosaic features of Marx. He dabbled in Quakerism, Catholicism, the Slavic mystique, the religion of science (rockets and TV classrooms will save us). His caliginous pessimism could, at times, be dispersed by the lightest wind, only to settle back again with cruel adhesiveness. His poor health, the premonitory tug

of that recurrent heart attack, added to the constrictive forces that hedged him in. A pen is a poor weapon with which to back one's way out of this enclosure. He knew it. But it was the only weapon he had left; and he died with it in his hand.

To his credit, these *were* works not-in-progress. They are some of the thousand first chapters he wrote to that great book which he could not write. He had the sense to see that each in turn was a dead end, though he had to keep up the Quixotic effort throughout the short time given him. He would even have had the good sense, his editor opines, not to publish these doomed pieces himself; although, after the common modern practice (whose ethics have not, I think, been sufficiently scrutinized), the author's scruples have been disregarded. Here is the Chambers that Chambers himself could not escape, though he felt he should—the faltering attempts at poetry, the retailing of all the subsidiary points of Dostoevsky as if they were something new, the crushing insights into evil that come to every precocious adolescent. Out of this raw material, the biography of one of our century's typical political figures could be written with a balance of understanding and severity. But to present the material as valuable in its own right is to do a disservice to this brave, baffled man.

He lived for one act only. There is a great myth abroad that down the maw of *Time* magazine great artists and thinkers are forever disappearing. Liberals are sure this happens to many mute inglorious Agees. Conservatives have been deceived into thinking the same thing of Chambers—that the Luce machine chewed up a great philosopher in its grindings, which are exceeding small. The truth, of course, is that Agee was not a great artist but a born *Time* movie-reviewer who had an emotional report to render about one part of his lifetime in this century—a resonant book of well-distilled autobiography, but not a fictional *creation* opening out toward further artifacts. And Chambers was not a profound thinker, though a sound one on basic issues; with a grasp on the emotional consequences of some of the truisms we turn into clichés; a little naive, and doggedly sincere—in short, the perfect man to justify God's ways to the average *Time* reader.

What makes Chambers extraordinary, then? Certainly not—as he tried unsuccessfully to convince himself—his “cover stories” on Toynbee or Niebuhr. It was a very simple thing. Chambers knew that, in his measure, he was a teacher; and he knew there is a basic moral code incumbent upon the teacher. Let me put it in concrete terms. If I, as a teacher,

make a mistake in reporting a text I am responsible for—and of course I have)—then, no matter how excusable or slight the error may have been, I consider it my duty to correct myself in the next possible class. However naive the students may be in their expectation—and they *do* tend to think an academician knows more than any man can pretend to—they expect a certain expertise from me in my field. If I report something that is not so, it acquires an unearned authority. And the only way to earn part of that lightly conceded authoritativeness, is to be one's harshest critic where there is question of error.

Yet authoritative political teachers led us astray in the third, the fourth, the fifth, sixth, now the seventh decade of this century. They did it, admittedly, in an area where the difficulties of prudential decision make error particularly understandable. Yet this should only make the erroneous guide more willing, in the name of truth and for the advance of wisdom, to admit his mistake. Knowledge is advanced—as liberals rightly insist—only by the unimpeded pursuit of truth. Yet the pursuit of truth is not unimpeded if those who skate off into the dark and fall through thin ice refuse to mark the danger areas.

Authorities of the present, false prophets in the past, want to forget their great mistakes on the nature of Russian Communism, of Stalin, of Mao, of Castro and, now, their estimate of the achievements of Khrushchev in thawing the ideological ice (after all, he did not thaw it enough to escape it himself). They do not like to contemplate the possibility that some of those students to whom they blithely praised the Russian revolution had to suffer for this, in time, as Chambers suffered. They forfeit the respect due to teachers when they refuse to teach us out of their own errors. (In a sense, all the great teachers have taught us out of their own bafflement.) This willingness of so many to forgive themselves and forget undoubtedly contributed to the hysterical reaction against Chambers' determination to tell his story. He *had* to be acting from vicious or insane motives; because if he were not doing so, then many others should have delivered their particular, slight testimony of disillusionment with a false god. His act indicted not only the particular Communist conspirators he named, but all the other witnesses to that conspiracy's peripheral effectiveness who might have spoken, and did not.

As he himself said, Chambers was not a conservative. He was not even what he called himself, a man of the right. He was simply a man who—when it was hard to do, and when many men better situated for doing it refused the task, and when these

men sneered at him out of their own moral uneasiness—told the truth. Which is man's job.

Reviewed by GARRY WILLS

Ehrenburg at Large

Memoirs: 1921-1941, by Ilya Ehrenburg; translated by Tatania Shebunina in collaboration with Yvonne Kapp. *Cleveland & New York: World Publishing Company, 1964. 543 pp. \$6.95.*

THROUGH a series of largely fortuitous circumstances, Ilya Ehrenburg happened to be in Berlin in 1921 when revolution seemed imminent there, in besieged Madrid and Barcelona during the Spanish civil war, in Moscow during the purges of 1937, and in Paris under the Germans. During these same years, he met and talked to dozens of important writers, among them Gide, Valéry, Hemingway, Joyce, Andrey Bely, and Alexey Remizov.

Ehrenburg is a gifted Soviet writer, and these memoirs are compelling journalism. They are also something more. They are art wedded to journalism, for Ehrenburg has been able to seize on details that catch the rhythm, dissonances, and cadences of an extraordinary era. What was later to be unlocked by time had already been caught by Ehrenburg in some notebook or lodged in some crevice of his mind. In Madrid he saw the fantastic and the humdrum living side by side, as they always do in war: people dying while waiting in line for bread, and the trams running almost to the trenches; the streets littered with broken crockery and bomb splinters, and a young couple prying a mirror-wardrobe in a furniture store; a small girl carried out of a bombed building like a broken doll, and poets meeting to discuss the resurrection of the *romancero* form. In Moscow in 1937, he listened to Babel telling him that a man could talk frankly only to his wife and then only with a blanket over his head; saw the tenants of his apartment house put the elevator out of operation so that they would not have to listen to its ominous clicking and wonder at which floor it would stop; a secretary told him that name boards for the glass doors of editors of *Izvestiya* were no longer made up because the names changed so frequently; friends of his kept two pairs of underwear packed and ready to go in case of arrest; and Boris Pasternak once naively said to him: "If only someone would tell Stalin about it."