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THE MAN OF LETTERS AND
THE FUTURE OF EUROPE¹

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I wish first to define the sense in which I shall use the term "man of letters." I shall mean the writer for whom his writing is primarily an *art*, who is as much concerned with style as with content; the understanding of whose writings, therefore, depends as much upon appreciation of style as upon comprehension of content. This is primarily the poet (including the dramatic poet), and the writer of prose fiction. To give emphasis to these two kinds of writer is not to deny the title "man of letters" to writers in many other fields: it is simply a way of isolating the problem of responsibility of the man of letters *qua* man of letters; and if what I have to say is true for the poet and the novelist, it will also be true for other writers in so far as they are "artists."

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The first responsibility of the man of letters is, of course, his responsibility towards his art, the same, which neither time nor circumstance can abate or modify, that other artists have: that is, he must do his best with the medium in which he works. He differs from other artists, in that his medium is his language: we do not all paint pictures, and we are not all musicians, but we all talk. This fact gives the man of letters a special responsibility

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towards everybody who speaks the same language, a responsibility which workers in other arts do not share. But, in general, special responsibilities which fall upon the man of letters at any time must take second place to his permanent responsibility as a literary artist. However, the man of letters is not, as a rule, exclusively engaged upon the production of works of art. He has other interests, like anybody else; interests which will, in all probability, exercise some influence upon the content and meaning of the works of art which he does produce. He has the same responsibility, and should have the same concern with the fate of his country, and with political and social affairs within it, as any other citizen; and in matters of controversy, there is no more reason why two men of letters should hold identical opinions, and support the same party and programme, than why any other two citizens should. Yet there are matters of public concern, in which the man of letters should express his opinion, and exert his influence, not merely as a citizen but as a man of letters: and upon such matters I think that it is desirable that men of letters should agree. In proceeding to suggest some of these, I have no expectation that all men of letters *will* agree with me: but if I confined myself to statements to which all men of letters, as men of letters, could give immediate assent, I should only be uttering platitudes.

The man of letters as such, is not concerned with the political or economic map of Europe; but he should be very much concerned with its cultural map. This problem, involving the relations of different cultures and languages in Europe, must have presented itself first, to the man of letters, as a domestic problem: in this context, foreign affairs are merely an extension of domestic affairs. Nearly every country, that has been long settled, is a composite of different local cultures; and even when it is completely homogeneous in race, it will, between east and west, or more often between north and south, exhibit differences of speech, of customs, and of ways of thinking and feeling. A small country of course, is usually assumed by foreigners to be much more

unified than it really is: and although the educated foreigner is aware that Britain contains within its small area several races and several languages, he may underestimate the importance of both the friction, and the often happy combination toward a common end, of the different types. It is a commonplace that industrialism (of which totalitarianism is a political expression) tends to obliterate these differences, to uproot men from their ancestral habitat, to mingle them in large manufacturing and business centres, or to send them hither and thither as the needs of manufacture and distribution may dictate. In its political aspect, industrialism tends to centralize the direction of affairs in one large metropolis, and to diminish that interest in, and control over, local affairs by which men gain political experience and sense of responsibility. Against this tendency, "regionalism"—as in the demand, from time to time, for greater local autonomy in Scotland or in Wales—is a protest.

It has often been the weakness of "regionalist" movements, to assume that a cultural malady can be cured by political means; to ascribe, to individuals belonging to the dominant culture, malignant intentions of which they may be innocent; and, by not probing deep enough into the causes, to prescribe a superficial remedy. By the materialist, these regional stirrings are often regarded with derision. The man of letters, who should be peculiarly qualified to respect and to criticize them, should be able to take a longer view than either the politician or the local patriot. He should know that neither in a complete and universal uniformity, nor in an isolated self-sufficiency, can culture flourish; that a local and a general culture are so far from being in conflict, that they are truly necessary to each other. To the engineering mind, the idea of a universal uniformity on the one hand or the idea of complete autarchy on the other, is more easily apprehensible. The union of local cultures in a general culture is more difficult to conceive, and more difficult to realize. But the man of

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letters should know that uniformity means the obliteration of culture, and that self-sufficiency means its death by starvation.

The man of letters should see also, that within any cultural unit, a proper balance of rural and urban life is essential. Without great cities—great, not necessarily in the modern material sense, but great by being the meeting-place of a society of superior mind and more polished manners—the culture of a nation will never rise above a rustic level; without the life of the soil from which to draw its strength, the urban culture must lose its source of strength and rejuvenescence. *Fortunatus et ille qui deos novit agrestes.*

What we learn from a study of conditions within our own countries, we can apply to the cultural economy of Europe. The primary aim of politics, at the end of a great war, must be, of course, the establishment of a peace, and of a peace which will endure. But at different times, different notions of what conditions are necessary for peace may prevail. At the end of the last war, the idea of peace was associated with the idea of independence and freedom: it was thought that if each nation managed all its own affairs at home, and transacted its foreign political affairs through a League of Nations, peace would be perpetually assured. It was an idea which disregarded the unity of European culture. At the end of this war, the idea of peace is more likely to be associated with the idea of efficiency—that is, with whatever can be planned. This would be to disregard the diversity of European culture. It is not that "culture" is in danger of being ignored: on the contrary, I think that culture might be safer if it were less talked about. But in this talk of "culture," the notion of a European culture—a culture with several sub-divisions, other than national boundaries, within it, and with various crossing threads of relationship between countries, but still a recognizable universal European culture—is not very prominent: and there is a danger that the importance of the various cultures may be assumed to be

in proportion to the size, population, wealth and power of the nations.

I have mentioned the problem of regional diversities of race and culture within one nation (as in Great Britain) not merely as a helpful analogy to the diversity of Europe, but because I think the two problems are essentially one and the same. I do not think that a unity between the main regional cultures of Europe is possible, unless each of the units is itself comprehensive of considerable diversity. A completely unified national culture, such as has been the ambition of German ideologues and politicians, for the last hundred years and more, to bring about in Germany, tends to become, as is easily seen from a purely political point of view, a menace to its neighbours. What is not so immediately obvious is that, from a cultural point of view, a nation so completely unified is a menace to itself. We can all see that in a nation the citizens of which have been trained to regard each other as brothers, we shall find the brotherliness intensified by, and in turn intensifying, a common hatred of foreigners. We can even say that a nation in which a good deal of internal bickering and quarrelling does not go on, cannot be a desirable member of the European community of nations. But I think that a nation which is completely unified culturally, will cease to produce any culture: so that there must be a certain amount of internal cultural bickering if it is to achieve anything in the way of art, thought and spiritual activity—and thereby make its contribution to the culture of Europe.

The achievement of a creative balance of local and racial forces, within a single nation or between the communities of Europe, seems to me, however, nothing like so easy as some theorists like Professor E. H. Carr, whose attention is concentrated upon purely political problems, seem to believe. "There is every reason to suppose," says Professor Carr in his *Conditions of Peace*, "that considerable numbers of Welshmen, Catalans and Uzbeks have quite sufficiently solved the problem of regarding themselves as

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good Welshmen, Catalans and Uzbeks for some purposes and good British, Spanish and Soviet citizens for others." I do not know how considerable numbers of Catalans and Uzbeks feel about it; but so far as the Welsh are concerned, Professor Carr seems to me to have answered a question which no Welshman would ask. The majority of Welsh, I have no doubt, would regard themselves as both "good Welsh" and "good Britons" (apart from the fact that the Welsh have a better ancestral claim than most of us in this island to regard themselves as *Britons*—but Mr. Carr has been a professor at Aberystwyth, so he ought to know): the question for them is, whether Welsh culture can maintain and develop itself against the pressure towards indifferenced uniformity which is exerted from London. The same question is asked in Scotland; the same question should be asked in every county of England which has not already been absorbed by London or by some great provincial industrial town. And if all the parts of Britain lose their local cultures, they will have nothing to contribute to the formation of British culture, and consequently, Britain will have nothing to contribute to European culture.

I have suggested that the cultural health of Europe, including the cultural health of its component parts, is incompatible with extreme forms of both nationalism and internationalism. But the cause of that disease, which destroys the very soil in which culture has its roots, is not so much extreme ideas, and the fanaticism which they stimulate, as the relentless pressure of modern industrialism, setting the problems which the extreme ideas attempt to solve. Not least of the effects of industrialism is that we become mechanized in mind, and consequently attempt to provide solutions in terms of *engineering*, for problems which are essentially problems of *life*.

I may seem, in the foregoing pages, to have been departing further and further from the subject of this paper; the responsibility of the man of letters. Political problems will continue to be

dealt with by politicians, and economic problems by economists; and there must continually be compromises between the political and the economic points of view. And just as these are not two wholly separate areas of activity, which can be satisfactorily dealt with by two mutually independent groups of specialists, so the "cultural" area cannot be isolated from either of these. It would be very convenient if it were so, and if the men of letters, and the other people whose special concern may be said to be matters of "culture," could pursue their policies indifferent to what happens in the political and economic realms. The assumption that such a clear separation of activities can be made, seems to underlie such a statement of Professor Carr's as the following:

The existence of a more or less homogeneous racial or linguistic group bound together by a common tradition and the cultivation of a common culture must cease to provide a *prima facie* case for the setting up or the maintenance of an independent political unit. (*Conditions of Peace*, p. 62.)

One cannot say that this statement, as it stands, is unacceptable. But it needs qualification; for, otherwise, one might infer from it that the "culture" of a "more or less homogeneous racial or linguistic group bound together by a common tradition and the cultivation of a common culture" can flourish unimpaired, whatever its degree of political subordination. In other words, I raise the question whether the culture of such a group can remain independent, without some degree of political independence: though on the other hand, I assert that *complete* cultural autarchy is not compatible with the existence of a common European culture. The world's real problems are in practice a complex, usually a confusion, of political, economic, cultural and religious considerations; in one or another situation, one or more of these will be sacrificed to the one which is, in that situation, the most compulsive; but every one of them involves the rest.

The responsibility of the man of letters at the present time,

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"cultural propaganda," even when the governors are not remarkably sensitive to culture: and, however necessary cultural propaganda may be under modern conditions, we must be alert to the fact that all propaganda can be perverted.

As I said earlier, I do not expect that all men of letters, in every country of Europe, will concur with my *views*; but I venture to hope that some of them will agree, that there is a range of public problems in which we all have, irrespective of nationality, language or political bias, a common interest, and about which we might hope to have a common mind; and I hope that some will agree that I have stated some of these problems. Such agreement would give more content to the phrase "the republic of letters." The "republic" or (to use a stronger term) the "fraternity" of letters does not, fortunately, demand that all men of letters should love one another—there always have been, and always will be, jealousy and intrigue amongst authors: but it does imply that we have a mutual bond, and a mutual obligation to a common ideal; and that on some questions we should speak for Europe, even when we speak only to our fellow-countrymen.

republic of letters