

The Nakedness of Mr. Fast

By Phillip Bonosky

THERE IS A remarkable passage in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* where the various suitors, or more accurately, bidders for the hand of Nastasya Filippovna, are gathered in her home awaiting her decision. The truth of the relationship among them all, and toward her particularly, which is ostensibly love, she decides to put to the test with the severest of all acids: money. Rogozhin, in a transport of almost mad joy, has offered 100,000 rubles for her, and stands highest bidder at this moment. But Gavrila Ilvolgin, Ganya, has had only "love" to offer her, but actually aches secretly for the fortune he hopes to get if Nastasya accepts him. Nastasya wants to know the truth. Then comes this scene:

Well, then, listen, Ganya, [she says] I want to see you as you really are for the last time. . . . You see this bundle of notes? There's hundred thousand in it, I'm going to throw it now on the fire before all of them—let them all be witnesses! As soon as the fire sets it ablaze, put your hands in the grate, but, mind, take your gloves off first, with your bare hands, and turn up your sleeves, and pull it out of the fire. If you do, the hundred thousand are all yours! You'll only burn your fingers a little, but it's a hundred thousand—think of it! It won't take you long to pull it out. And I'll have a good look at you just as you are when crawling into the fire for my money! All are witnesses that the money will be yours. And if you don't, it'll burn. . . .

And she does throw the fortune in paper notes on the fire. All the guests there react in their various ways; but it is Ganya on whom all eyes rest. The

notes catch and begin to burn. Ganya undergoes the agonies of hell but does not stoop before them all to singe his fingers for the fortune he desperately longs to have. He faints finally from the unbearable tension. Nastasya Filippovna cries: "He didn't do it, after all. Stood his ground: so his vanity is even greater than his lust for money."

With the whole world watching, no man, regardless of the strength of his cupidity, can get down before that watching world and crawl before it for money. One is saved from that supreme humiliation only by a greater power—vanity. But the clash between the two is nevertheless fatal; the energy of the struggle generated in this clash between two great forces ends by destroying Ganya himself; all his spiritual resources are burnt up, and as is true in Dostoevsky's book, so it is true in life: such a man becomes a hollow man.

• • •

This book* would ordinarily not be worth reviewing. It's a Cold War document; it is also a clinical report, a restatement of vanity, a cry of infantile rage. In any case these curious and often pathetic notes which have been gathered between hard covers cannot seriously be considered as art, or political or literary criticism. True, the book burlesques the form of the great confessions which have enriched the world (Rousseau, Tolstoy, etc.);

* *The Naked God*, by Howard Fast, Praeger, N. Y., \$3.50.

but its tradition is an ignoble one. Fast's *The Naked God* takes its place with the long list of books written by renegades, informers, police spies and literary stoolpigeons with which our epoch has been harassed, and has gratefully forgotten.

Its only use for us and for all those who are seriously dedicated to socialism is that Fast, driven by a monstrous vanity, has played out to its logical end, and even bigger-than-life size, the whole petty bourgeois theoretical and political drama, which arose on a world scale but took a particularly virulent and dangerous form in the working-class movement of the United States.

For starting at a point where many others also found themselves, confused, disoriented and sincerely dismayed, Fast has moved rapidly from that position of an injured but still sincere socialist to an open enemy of the working class movement everywhere, and a noisy propagandist for war against the Soviet Union.

It is important for all those who found themselves going along the road with this man part of the way to know where the road ended, and why it inevitably ended there. It is important, in connection with Fast's career inside the Communist Party, to understand the origins of that monstrous opportunism which characterized him, the role it played, the form it assumed and its inevitable outcome. That Fast spells out clearly and unmistakably this whole direction in his book is the last service he has rendered to the Communist Party members of this country.

The book itself is confused, often incoherent, and almost constantly self-contradictory. Fast feels impelled at

times to deny certain outrageous lies about the Communist Party but only so that, by doing so, he might thus "earn" the moral right to promote his own even more outrageous lies. His anecdotes are made up of invention plus quarter-truths. His pages are a farrago of spite, hysteria, peevishness, unconscious buffoonery, the petty settling of old accounts—all of this ending finally on the anti-climactic and hilarious complaint that "Life is just not simple!"

But through all the hysteria, rage, spite, envy, one theme, one cry, like the shriek of a modern Cato, comes clear: Communism must be destroyed!

With this aim he boasts that, soon after the Twentieth Congress, "many of us then believed that if we moved quickly and decisively, we could seize control of the entire Party, find new leadership of decent, honest and humane people, form a democratic, humanistic movement for socialism—and perhaps light a spark that would fire the imagination of the entire world Communist movement."

This plan for a palace revolution, for a *putsch*, failed, for the rank-and-file Communists of this country would have none of it, and Fast himself openly deserted to carry on his criminal aims now with the assistance of the State Department and any other renegades and turn-coats he is able to influence.

His main thesis, which is also the thesis of the State Department and represented the tactic which it applied, or tried to apply, in the Hungarian events, is that socialism, though good in itself, cannot grow and develop under the leadership of the Communist Parties (though it was these same par-

ties which brought it into existence). Communist Party rule is deadly first, he maintains, to artists, particularly writers, everywhere; it destroys democracy and other virtues which Fast highly regards and indeed should be highly regarded; and all this being so, and since "honorable" men must be opposed to it, if they cannot be Brutuses they can certainly be allies of Allen Dulles.

If Fast is obliged to back and fill constantly, and cannot quite bear to put himself down for a villain and a rogue, and so even now in the middle of his jeremiah, he finds it necessary to reassert certain truths about Party members, he does so at the risk of alienating those new-found friends and applauders whose demand on him is absolute and who will not countenance the luxury of tactical maneuvers. They want Fast to say outright that Communists are traitors, that war is absolutely necessary, and that he was completely betrayed by the Communists. Fast, who still wants to influence Communists, cannot quite do so in their terms: and so from Harry Schwartz, the *New York Times* "expert" on the Soviet Union, and who to some extent midwived this book, comes the grudging words: "It is still true," he points out in his review in the *Times* "that the disjointed organization of the book will bother some readers." Nevertheless, Fast's defection was "one of the biggest propaganda defeats Moscow received in 1957." Why Moscow? Because in this country Fast's "public defection from the Communist Party . . . received relatively scant notice . . . because his public reputation had been tarnished by his Communist position, and a new generation had forgotten the

popularity a decade and more ago of books like 'Citizen Paine' . . . Nevertheless, the "important point is that Mr. Fast discovered the real meaning of freedom."

Freedom? When the Cold War began in earnest in this country, Fast was one of the first writers who was victimized. With a speed and unanimity that would have done credit to any "totalitarian" organization, all the publishers in the country who were clamoring for his books only the day before shut the door on him. Another publisher who had brought out pocket-book editions of several of Fast's books decided to burn them all, and was only barely persuaded to sell them to Mr. Fast. All book stores boycotted his works. He was sent to jail. His name was even stripped from the movies based on his stories. His books were taken from the shelves of school and public libraries. He was forced to publish his books himself, and the universal boycott by reviewers—and first of all the *Times*' Schwartz—bankrupted him.

So he was "forgotten"! But even so there is no joy for a writer in being so "forgotten" in his own land; there is no happiness in this exile at home, and the vastness of his foreign audience was no completely satisfying compensation. Along with the loss of an American audience there was also the loss of a fortune.

The price which the bourgeoisie places upon the integrity of the writer in the United States is almost unendurable. Fast, of course, could not openly capitulate to his enemies because they were impoverishing him. But even those who reject with contempt open bribery nevertheless are

placed under the inhuman weight of having their virtue constantly and publicly priced. The compensation for that, of those intellectuals who, in Fast's words, "made great sacrifices, accepted war and prison and poverty . . . brilliant careers were given up, success and wealth bypassed by some, respect and honor by others. . . ." was the "splendid dream of brotherhood and justice."

And if that "dream," which must be flawless, is, or seems to be, destroyed, what then can such men who have "sacrificed" so much do except turn with rage against the supposed killers of the dream?

Anyone who joins the working-class movement with a consciousness of having "sacrificed" anything whatsoever already contains in himself the seeds of an eventual "disillusionment" and the bitter feeling of having been betrayed. It is a petty-bourgeois notion, pure and simple. It is opportunist in its very nature; it is "idealist" philosophically, for it demands of history a bargain which cannot be made.

If from the point of view of a petty-bourgeois such a dream of brotherhood is unhistoric and untrue, from the point of view of the working class that dream remains true, realizable and in every sense glorious.

Fast inveighs against the Communist Party for its alleged abuses against writers. But characteristically he blames the Party now for precisely those arrogant pronouncements on literary matters which Fast was most egregiously guilty of himself, and if one remembers his swashbuckling tour through literature in the book *Literature and Reality*, then it would seem

no further evidence to convict is necessary.

He declares unequivocally that Communism *must* destroy the writer, and that by the same token the writer must find himself inevitably an enemy of Communism. And yet he himself admits that it was not the Communist Party that destroyed him as a writer but it was official reaction—those who have now claimed his body—that did it. Can the following words be plainer? "During this period [McCarthyism] I found my own destruction as a writer who had full and normal access to the American public. Bit by bit, that access was pared away; reviewers began to read Communist propaganda into things I had written; bookstores were reluctant to order books. . . . I had come to the point (on the publication of *Spartacus*) where my destruction as a practicing writer was more or less complete. . . ."

If he managed to get to readers at all, it was due to the devoted and selfless efforts by numerous rank and file Communists who took his books from door to door and sold them.

The sensitivity and high moral quality of poets and great artists is, in Fast's notion, unreconcilable with commitment to a revolutionary cause led by Communists. But life proves the opposite. In fact, no other cause in all history has rallied to it on so gigantic a scale the pens and hearts of great artists. Mention Romain Rolland, Anatole France, Henri Barbusse, Martin Anderson Nexo, Maxim Gorky, Sean O'Casey, Theodore Dreiser, Arnold Zweig, Pablo Picasso, Pablo Neruda, Diego Rivera . . . and so on and on, the list is endless! And mention those who made their reputations when they

were Communists or significantly influenced by Communism, and compare the work they did *after* they left the movement with the work they did while under its influence and inspiration: Ignazio Silone, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, James T. Farrell, Dos Passos, Andre Malraux . . . and Howard Fast!

Fast piously states that he yearned for real criticism from Marxists but all he got was either flattery or hard knocks. And yet this is scarcely candid, for even in this book, with persisting arrogance, he dictates how critics and readers are to regard his works and his reputation. *The Proud and the Free* was "one of the great novels of the American Revolution. . . ." *Freedom Road* . . . "was taken to the hearts of the Negro people as was no other novel of our time," etc.

Furthermore, the fact is that Fast's works were criticized—no doubt with excessive kindness—in print, in letters to him and in statements from public platforms. Would that he had been able to heed such criticism!

So much for modesty and the desire for criticism. And as for his noble desire for freedom of expression, restrained by the Communist ogres, Fast writes:

Within the Party, and particularly on the *Daily Worker*, the reports of the Twentieth Congress [of the CPSU] had come as an explosive force of mental liberation. . . . It was little, but it was enough for us on the *Daily Worker* to seize sledges and break the cursed images with the zest of a drowning man gulping air. [Fast manages to do the impossible in his drowning zest to break

images with a sledge-hammer!] Everyone on the staff joined to one extent or another. Myself, I struck out in every direction with a joy I had not known for years.

And what were the things he wanted to shout to the world? "A whole group of us in the Party had been secret believers in psychiatry. . . ." He could now openly "curse capital punishment." Now, openly and with full concern for responsibility and truth he could "charge that the Jewish people were prisoners within the Soviet Union"; and that the USSR was playing an imperialist game for oil in the Middle East; also that the USSR was provoking force in the attempt to start a war on the Suez question. On the level of a sober clown, in another context, Fast also found himself so liberated by the 20th Congress that he could make a fervent speech in favor of bubble gum!

"But what a time," he exults, "that was for us! What freedom! What glory!"

What glory indeed! Today, as a confirmed enemy of socialism, he is bound to a devilish wheel of hatred, and like some figure in Dante's Hell, he must pray and scheme for the failure of socialism in the world. He must hope for the destruction of the Soviet Union. He must be tormented by its successes. He must rejoice when there are setbacks. And, like all others who have taken this road, in the end he must be driven by desperation to demand the entire destruction of that "dream" which now, a more glorious dream than ever, haunts him like a nightmare!