

THE CASE OF HOWARD FAST

JUST FOR A

RIBAND . . .

One of the better publicised reverberations of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 was the public break with communism and the American Communist Party announced by Howard Fast. Doubtless the news came to thousands of other readers and admirers of Fast as the staggering bombshell it was to me. Not that I considered — then or now — that Fast was one of the literary giants of our time; but rather than he had come to symbolise that exceedingly rare, almost extinct creature — the Western writer of Leftist principles who stuck to them through all the years of intellectual blackout and surrender of the cold war period. How was it possible to explain this defection or to understand it?

Fast himself set out to answer these questions. In the well-worn fashion of those who renounce their past faith, he wrote a breast-beating, self-incriminating book, "The Naked God." Those who read it found it hysterical, incoherent and contradictory. Much of Howard Fast's intellectual glamour was tarnished by this confused grappling with the problems of the motivations for the great decisions he had taken. The problem of what made Howard Fast tick was not answered by "The Naked God." It was inevitable that someone should attempt to answer it.

Hershel Meyer has given a masterly answer in 'History and Conscience' — subtitled 'The Case of Howard Fast.' It would be easy just to take Fast's own confessions in 'The Naked God' and hurl them back at him; Meyer has resisted the temptation. His examination of the case of Fast is not of significance for Fast alone. He has taken the wider canvas, the study of what makes intelligent, emotional thinkers sheer off on wildly contradictory tacks at sudden turns in the world's development. Fast is only an example; there were others before him and will doubtless be others after, for whom the course of progress does not fit the preconceived ideas of its supporters. "The exalted hopes of utopian idealists are always in advance of what is realizable at a given historical period. Disillusionment is consequently an aftermath of every progressive social upheaval", writes Meyer, looking back beyond Fast to Southey and Wordsworth generations before, and to those who turned from supporters to enemies of the French Revolution because of its "excesses", its miscarriages of justice.

Armed with this philosophic understanding of disillusion, Meyer turns to the study of Fast's own explanations for his rejection of Marxist philosophy and communism, dealing with the sociology, the politics and the psychology of the man and the type. "Formerly destitute, discontented intellectuals, having participated in the post-war and armaments prosperity, gradually succumbed to the philistinism of suburbia," he writes. "But for the former publicly-avowed and committed Communist intellectual, the process of transformation is more complex. He must find reasons . . . He may have joined the party unobtrusively and clandestinely, but when he defects he finds it necessary to make official announcements accompanied by passionate accusations. Almost always, at the point of departure, he takes the "sins" of the October Revolution."

In a rational, balanced manner, contrasting sharply with Fast's own "Naked God" hysteria, he traces, stage by stage, the development of such a man from his first act of defection — 'I am neither anti-Soviet nor anti-Communist.' (Fast, February 1957) to call for the destruction of all communist parties, and anti-Soviet tirades over Mr. Dulles' Radio Liberation. Meyer evades nothing—neither Fast's horror at the facts given by Krushchov to the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet communists, nor Fast's anguish at alleged anti-semitism in the USSR, nor Fast's praise for the freedom of the artist in America. Each point is weighed, argued, and critically considered. From it emerges not only a portrait of Fast as a rather pathetic, self-inflated figure lost in the wilderness of his own confusion, but also a balanced statement in defence of the socialist world and the Marxist philosophy which has guided it into being.

In one of his moments of bitterness, Meyer writes: "Fast had been considered a leading writer on the Left. For political reasons, his books were ignored by the literary world in his own country. But in the socialist sector of the world his books sold in the millions of copies, eagerly read by large audiences and sponsored by socialist governments which approved the humanist, freedom-seeking heroes of his volumes. Now Fast proclaimed in bitter and anguished accents that the world which had spitefully ignored his work was free, while the world which had raised him to the stature of a world literary figure was enslaved and oppressive." But the real bitterness is left for the end. Here, in a postscript to an outstanding piece of social-literary criticism — albeit compressed into some sixty pages — Meyer quotes Byron's biting words to a renegade of his time, Robert Southey.

"Mr. Southey may applaud himself to the world, but he has his own heartiest contempt; and the fury with which he foams against all who stand in the phalanx he forsook . . . is the rancour of the renegade, the bad language of the prostitute who stands at the corner of the street, and showers her slang upon all, except those who may have bestowed upon her her 'little shilling'."

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