

## “REFLECTIONS ON SPAIN”<sup>1</sup>

Edvard Kocbek (1904–81)

Translated by John K. Cox

### Translator’s introduction

Edvard Kocbek was a Christian socialist poet from Slovenia. Trained as a teacher, and widely considered to be one of the finest poets of his day, he took bold and unpopular stands on many issues throughout his life. He played an active role in the military resistance to the Nazis and Italians in Yugoslavia in 1941, calling for cooperation between Christians, socialists, and communists of all nationalities to defeat fascism. After the war he briefly held several official positions in Tito’s government, but he soon ran afoul of the League of Communists. Today his works are still very popular in Slovenia and he is sometimes hailed as the “conscience of his nation” because of his conscientious and constructive role in many of the discussions and disputes of twentieth-century European history. Specifically, he is most remembered for his repeated calls for the communist government to admit and atone for its postwar massacres of noncommunist civilians, his voluminous war diaries, his stereotype-busting war stories, and the unlikely combination of intellectualism and pastoralism in his poetry.

Kocbek’s strong support of the Republican cause in Spain naturally got him banned from ever publishing in this important Catholic publication again. He also subsequently suffered official government persecution, because the Royal Yugoslav government in Belgrade favored the Nationalist and fascist forces of General Francisco Franco. Far from being merely a period piece or a dry theological exercise suitable only for a small portion of society, this essay by Kocbek is a genuine call to arms: against smugness and hypocrisy, against intellectual laziness, and against the unwillingness to discern right and wrong in an admittedly complicated situation. This call for historical honesty and for international humanitarian engagement is important not just as a sidelight on the debacle on Spain in the 1930s. The international debates and inaction over wars in Kocbek’s own country in the 1990s often elicited comparisons to Spain, and, indeed, the demands that the terrorism and wars of today make upon us also give this essay continued relevance.

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<sup>1</sup> A translation of “Premišljevanje o Španiji,” originally published in the Slovene Catholic journal *Dom in svet* (*Our Country and the World*) 50.1–2 (1937): 90–105. The following explanatory footnotes are provided by the translator.

## REFLECTIONS ON SPAIN

“Many a Christian today is either Pontius Pilate or Hamlet.”

---José Bergamin<sup>2</sup>

The world today is no longer easily understandable; instead of clarity on the issues, a deliberate and equivocating vagueness is widespread. Indecisiveness and inarticulateness are not actually our natural companions in life; they are, however, the basic and self-serving yardsticks of a humanity which has lost its sense of heroism. The more developed and populous our society becomes, the more anonymous become the factors that operate in it and on it. For that reason, lack of clarity is not an attribute of some psychological species of human being; rather it represents a general social reality. For a society to roll blithely along like this is to mask the interests which are vying for spiritual predominance in an open competition of “vitalist” forces.

This lack of clarity can only be caused by that fraudulent human spirit which has spread like wildfire over our land in the past centuries. It has become lost in its own standards and units of measure. Ontology tells us that a person who is too much in love with his or her own country loses that valuable spiritual freedom which is bestowed on us by our independence from the powers of this world. That person becomes a slave to a specific, isolated phenomenon. We are well acquainted with the nature of such an existence. People who choose security instead of exposing themselves to risks, who pick sober calculation instead of heroism and partialness in place of wholeness—they are spiritually *bourgeois*.<sup>3</sup> They are men and women without a sense of creativity, and they represent the greatest heresy of contemporary times. We are familiar with their masks: the essence of the bourgeois spirit is more a

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<sup>2</sup> José Bergamin (1895–1983) was a Spanish Catholic poet, editor, and philosopher. He was a well-known opponent of Franco.

<sup>3</sup> Although Kocbek’s language has been modernized wherever possible, the use of the somewhat superannuated term “bourgeois” (as well as of some of his gender-specific pronouns) is unavoidable in this essay. His intentions can be easily discerned and transferred to our own society. Furthermore, it should be noted that Kocbek was above all a poet and not a political philosopher or historian, so his language is sometimes evocative instead of analytical.

hidden—rather than explicit—disloyalty to the wholeness of humanity and to heroism.

Throughout history, most heresies and disloyalty have typically been readily visible phenomena; they were the spiritual heroism of determined people who opted, according to their consciences, for a greater and finer truth. But the disloyalty of the bourgeoisie is deceitful, camouflaged; it represents the conscious and shameful exchange of higher values for lower ones, and for that reason it wants to conceal its actions from the outside world. In doing so, it develops a dazzling dialectical argument.

Bourgeois humanity has two faces: it is a deceptive doppelgänger. On the outside, the bourgeois is a person of “good will,” but inside he or she is an unbeliever, a skeptic, or even a cynic. The bourgeois thought process is but a concealed retreat into lies, an indolent impotence, which can create neither harmony within itself nor a clear sense of connectedness with the world. This bourgeois confusion is not related to that healthy, straightforward, and natural tension between the temporal and the eternal; this inconsistency is not tied up with the tragedy of the human condition. For these very reasons the conservatism, nationalism, patriotism, and indeed all collective thinking of the bourgeoisie is actually a negation of the freedom of the human spirit and mind.

In recent years it has become ever clearer that the bourgeois is nothing more than a calculating soul, a weak creature without convictions who does not develop his or her human potential and who trusts only in “worldly wisdom,” impersonal skills, and technology. Although in essence this spirit is a betrayal of humanity, it nevertheless wants to give the impression that it represents a necessary and fruitful “golden mean,” that it embodies historical experience and truth, and that it is therefore the legitimate approach to all issues.

Is it surprising, then, that we experience this as a paradox? The bourgeois poses as the guardian of the spiritual foundations of existence and yet also begins to take control over everyday life within the society. There is a meeting and a blending together of the social bourgeois and the spiritual bourgeois. The former is a man of social prominence, who perhaps once earned his advantages but is no longer worthy of them; the latter is a man of internal phariseism. Both of them want to prove by

their activities that they are worthy of their privileges. That is how fascism originated, and that is how new fascist movements begin.

Fascism is the public, organized defense of a pragmatic, hierarchical cast of mind with all social and spiritual means. Because of the pace of change across the world, political tensions have exploded and passionate forces have been unleashed. The fascist bourgeoisie has yoked these forces into the strengthening of its own position. Everywhere fascism struts about in the guise of the warrior against Marxism. But, truth be told, the people in the fascist ranks also lose their individuality and freedom. In addition, fascism sins by covering up social facts in the name of decorum, just as it hides its guilt under the cloak of public order. Fascism presents itself as a mystical reaction to the mechanical nature of life—as a renewal of society, one in which the duty to preserve is endorsed over the duty to create. In this renewed society, mind and spirit mean nothing but order, discipline, power, vitality, and a favorable bottom line. This seamless truth is a sham. Fascism is more dangerous than communism, for if communism clearly and openly pursues its goals, then fascism operates in fictitious harmony with all of our spiritual principles and institutions. In reality, though, it robs the holy hierarchical soul of its freedom and replaces it with the unconditional struggle to defend the previously existing order of things. The question of Haecker<sup>4</sup> is still ringing in our ears: What amounts to more: a dead truth or a living lie?

To a large degree fascism has succeeded in producing the impression that it is the defender of spiritual life, individuality, legitimacy, order, justice, and even universal values. For this reason it was not difficult for fascism to win the favor of middle-class Christians, who merely inherited their beliefs; these people live from prefabricated facts in an intellectual sense as well. They never work at anything with creativity and zeal but just arrange things with mistrustful caution—things which get more and more lost in the act of tidying them up. European Christianity is by and large imprisoned in a certain mode of social thought; the sanctification of the status quo and history has taken precedence over the idea of changing the world.

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<sup>4</sup> The Bavarian existentialist philosopher Theodor Haecker (1879–1945) was well-known for his studies and translations of Kierkegaard. He was an opponent of the Nazis but survived World War II and published his journals in 1947 under the title *Tag- und Nachtbücher, 1939–45*.

Middle-class Christianity is starting to act like it is true, orthodox Christianity. Not even the church hierarchy around the world resists this very strongly; little wonder, says Berdiaev,<sup>5</sup> since the religious orders have forever shown the inclination to become bourgeois. Thus we come to the unhappy but indisputable fact that fascism equates its spirituality with that of Christianity and that it exploits religious feeling. And, for its part, Christian practice does not preclude the close cooperation of the Church with militant fascism. Here one must add that it is not simply the deterioration of the Christian spirit all over the world that is responsible for this impossible muddle. Also at fault is the conscious service rendered by many leading Christians to the secular political forces of fascism.

Spain offers us a moving example of this. Spain reveals to us, first of all, the guilt of Christianity as a historical and social force, and, secondly, it demonstrates the camouflaging of that guilt. This much is now obvious: whoever speaks of the inability clearly to understand the case of Spain is trying to escape responsibility and is directly supporting an untruth. Whoever defends just one point of view (and it's interesting that the bourgeois Christian defends the fascist perspective) is in the direct service of a lie.

The Christian press cuts a sad figure these days. With only a few exceptions, it has been unable to maintain its independence; it has taken the fascists' side, just as in many places the liberal press has taken an anti-fascist position out of naked self-interest.

The Christian papers talk endlessly about a crusade against the Bolsheviks, about the holy war of Christianity against the church-arsonists and the murderers of priests, against the defilers of women and children, all of whom drink human blood. But there is no talk of the causes of this terrible slaughter and devastation, and even less about the fascist atrocities, which are at least as numerous as the cruelties of the furious masses of the people.

The following lines are intended to draw attention to the truth about Spain, which has been tragically split and divided but which does indeed represent something comprehensible. These pages are intended to

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<sup>5</sup> Nikolai Berdiaev (1874–1948; earlier spelled Berdayev or Berdyaev) was a Russian philosopher of religion. He opposed materialist world views and elaborated a Dostoyevskian form of existentialism.

point out the historical guilt of Spanish Christianity and the culpability of those Christians who have today taken refuge in outward success instead of in inward consistency and composure. This essay does not, therefore, seek to whitewash the many crimes that have been perpetrated against the Church and that continue to occur; on the contrary it challenges the insolent fascist attempt to transfer the center of gravity of the dispute to the other side, as if the civil war in Spain were a religious war. The causes of the horrific settling of accounts in Spain are not religious but social.

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