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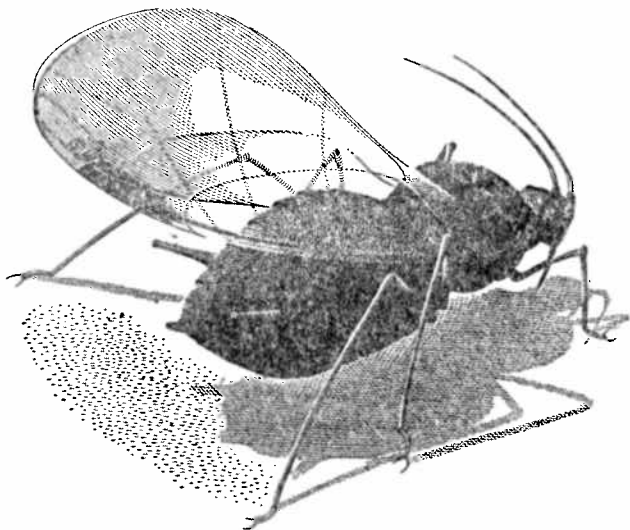
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# WORLD REVIEW

Incorporating Review of Reviews

March 1949

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MARCH 1949. PROPRIETORS: HULTON PRESS LTD. 43 SHOE LANE, LONDON, E.C.4. CEN. 7400. Published Monthly. Subscription rates: Inland 20s. 6d. p.a., 10s. 3d. for six months; Foreign 20s. p.a., 10s. for six months; Canada and Newfoundland, 19s. 6d. p.a., 9s. 9d. for six months; U.S.A. \$4.50 p.a.



# Political Testament

Professor Berdyaev, one of the great religious philosophers of his time, died a year ago this month. Our article, the last he wrote, is his most urgent appeal for a reconciliation between East and West. It is printed here for the first time, and we give his message as he left it

## NICOLAS BERDYAEV

THESE has hardly ever been so much darkness and confusion as in the present age. People are muffled up in lies and falsehoods and, more often than not, chance and passing impressions are their only guides through the maze of present events. Illusions, and particularly the illusion of power, overawe everyone. We hear perpetually Marxist phrases on the lips of people who have not the slightest conception of what Marxism is. People today have so little imagination that they cannot conceive of any choice but the choice between Capitalism and Communism. Here, as in many other things, they are driven by blind fate. War, revolution, Fascism, and the rest—all these have the power of fate inherent in them. There are very few who still believe that human freedom also can have a part to play in deciding the future. Many among those who dislike Communism are yet convinced that it is ineluctable and that the world is doomed to become Communist; many who hate war believe war to be inevitable. Some fail to perceive any meaning whatsoever in the happenings of the world today; they are already anticipating the end of all things, because the pattern of life to which they were attached has finally passed away. Others, for whom the end is epitomised in the advent of Communism, are yet trying to adapt their minds to it and tack together Communism and Christianity or some different philosophy of life, while repeating the commonplaces of Marxist ideology.

Modern man has shown very little creative imagination in regard to the future. He is overshadowed by two world wars, and this explains in part his ineptitude, perplexity and absence of inner freedom.

Fate and freedom alike play a part in history; and there are times, as in wars and revolutions, when fate is the stronger of the two. *Freedom*—the freedom of man and of nations—could never have been the origin of two world wars. These latter were brought about by fate, which exercises its power owing to the weakness and decline of freedom and of the creative spirit of man. Almost all contemporary political ideologies, with their characteristic tendency to state-idolatry, are likewise largely a product of two world wars, begotten as they are of the inexorabilities of fate.

One of the principal modern temptations is to divide the world into two parts—the one dominated by Communism and the other by Capitalism—into ‘Soviet Russia’ and ‘America’. People repeat hackneyed phrases in their attempt to consolidate this division and thus prepare the way for war. The polarisation of the world in a rather military fashion into two camps is originally an invention of the Marxist Communists. The Communists never cease to proclaim that anyone who is not Communist is thereby *ipso facto* a reactionary, a lackey of capitalism, or even in the pay of American monopolists. People in Soviet Russia talk perpetually of the ‘capitalist encirclement’

and of the threat of war by Western ‘imperialists’. In fact, Communists suffer from persecution mania, and this in itself has a disintegrating effect on our world today. The manifest hostility of the West towards Russia has no doubt greatly assisted this disintegrating tendency, though, admittedly, the victim of persecution mania is usually himself the first to persecute others. But the West is likewise by no means free from manias and visitations.

As a matter of fact, he who divides the world into two parts moves in the sphere of abstractions, and Marxist doctrine contributes greatly to this movement. The ideologists of capitalism, on the other hand, fail to realise that they are merely Marxists in reverse. The world as it is, and not as people dream it to be, is not divided into two camps: it is infinitely more complex and diverse. ‘Soviet Russia’, ‘America’, ‘capitalist encirclement’, ‘iron curtain’, and the rest, are abstractions invented to a large extent as tactical weapons of war. Soviet Russia is indeed intensely isolationist *vis-à-vis* the West; there may also be a group of Americans with vested interests who would like to drop atom bombs on Russia. But neither the Russians nor the Americans want war, and it would be difficult to force them into it. The idea of a ‘capitalist encirclement’ contains some truth, but, taken as a whole, it is an abstraction born of a mixture of persecution mania and stiffened Marxist doctrine. It is based on the assumption that, under the economic régime of capitalism in a given society, religion, philosophy, science, morality, literature, art, etc. must needs all be ‘capitalistic’. Such a conviction is inherent in totalitarian thought, for which the economic factor provides the basis and iron framework for all things. The whole structure, however, falls to the ground the moment we refuse to put reality on the Procrustean bed of economic materialism. ‘Soviet Russia’ is similarly an abstraction. The full reality of Russia cannot be identified with, or exhausted by, the concept of a Communist society. The life of the Russian people, little known to, and still less appreciated by, the outside world, is far more

complex than the figments created by Marxist doctrinaires.

Men and nations in misfortune tend to seek for scapegoats upon whose wretched heads they might place the consequences of their own misdeeds. It is a comfort to man when he finds a foe on whom he can lay the responsibility for his adversity. Thus savages strike at inanimate objects, believing them to be the cause of their afflictions. We do not seem to have improved much on them. In things both small and great we look for substitutes who could be sacrificed to make up for our misfortunes. In this pursuit we become addicted to the creation of myths. Even the most extreme of rationalists are not innocent of mythological constructions: in fact, their rationalism is itself a myth.

The origin of evil and suffering has been attributed to a great number of myths: to ‘Jews’, ‘Freemasons’, ‘Jesuits’, ‘Bolsheviks’, to ‘Communists’ or ‘capitalists’, to ‘Soviet Russia’ or ‘capitalist America’, and to many others. We may perhaps be able to account for some of these scapegoats, but they have, of course, not the universal and awe-inspiring application ascribed to them by mythological imagination. In affliction men lose their sense of reality and do not easily admit themselves guilty of anything. Inasmuch, however, as myths are true and correspond to some reality, this reality is within man who creates the myth, and not outside of him.

MARX created the profoundly significant myth of the messianic mission of the proletariat, which embodied a very real experience among the working people. Marx was a great economist who made a remarkable scientific analysis of certain social and economic phenomena, but he was also a creator of myths, and he was imbued with a messianic consciousness. The messianic myth of the proletariat became a dynamic factor in countries which were, from the point of view of scientific Marxism, unfit for the Communist Revolution, and in which there was no proletariat or capitalist industry to speak of. The predominantly agricultural

and economically backward Russia has witnessed, therefore, not so much the emergence of the dictatorship of the proletariat in her midst as of the dictatorship of the idea of the proletariat. And on the altar of this idea there was sacrificed an untold number of real, living proletarians.

A similar process is going on now in other east-European countries. Contrary to the vulgar theory of evolution, it is the most backward, pre-capitalistic countries—Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Hungary, and, in the future perhaps India and China, rather than America or England—which start the revolution to abolish capitalism. But this is not simply a betrayal of Marx's original analysis. It only shows that myths and abstractions have a greater force and actuality than so-called realistic people are prepared to admit.

As a matter of fact, the proletariat as such does not exist. American workers, who are as much victims of exploitation as any other workers, have yet no proletarian consciousness to speak of, and they are not in the least like the Marxist proletariat. English workers may be 'class-conscious', and they have united to protect their interests, but they are quite different from the workers on the European Continent and hardly resemble the Marxian idea of the proletariat. In pre-revolutionary Russia there was a very small proletariat and one quite unlike any other: after the Revolution it has disappeared altogether, since no Communist, or for that matter genuinely Socialist, society can, by definition, suffer any class-conscious group of people, and thus cannot be said to bring about the growth of the power of the proletariat. The proletariat, then, is a nonentity: real existence can be ascribed only to workers as human beings, to their joys and sufferings, to their social humiliation and their struggle, and it is the conditions of their life that must be the object of radical transformation.

Capitalism is in some sense a real thing in the economic structure of Western society (though it is already decaying and is bound to disappear); but no reality can be attached to a capitalistic civilisation, and the Western

body politic cannot possibly be reduced to the terms of capitalist economics. Even in the Soviet Union economics are largely determined by ideology, and ideas, rather than economic conditions, provide the inspiration for the destruction of forces hostile to the Revolution. The dynamic of Marxism lies precisely in that it assumes implicitly the power and reality of ideas and universals, just as Platonism or mediæval Realism do: the class is more real than the person; the general and universal are more real than the particular and individual.

The real difference between Russia and the West cannot, then, be expressed in terms of abstract Communist or capitalist theory. It is true no doubt—but for reasons which transcend the categories of economic theory—that Russia is the least bourgeois country in the world (though there is a danger that she may become so now). It is equally true that the Russians are endowed with a profound sense of fellowship and common responsibility, and that they would never, in any case, have been able to build up a capitalistic *laissez-faire* society. The Russian writers and thinkers of the nineteenth century never ceased to testify to this. This is due to the peculiar mentality of the Russian people and is bound up with their spiritual mission in the world, which the Soviets tend to misrepresent and to defend in a way which is not likely to appeal to the outside world. The true vindication and realisation of the mission of Russia should, indeed, lead not to irreconcilable division between herself and other nations, not to two opposing blocs, and hence to war, but, on the contrary, to the unity of mankind and the brotherhood of peoples, for the fundamental quality of the Russian idea is to inspire and to create unity and link together all men in a communion. Unfortunately, the true voice of Russia—her national as well as her universal voice—is not heard in the mumbo-jumbo of international politics.

Communism dealt a heavy blow to the Socialist parties of Europe by depriving them of the allegiance of a large number of workers. The Socialists and Social-democrats have exhibited a lack of inspiration and

of the power to inspire. The Socialists—at least in the countries of Continental Europe—are too much absorbed in parliamentary pettifogging and party-combinations: they have become the business men of parliamentary democracy. They have often been in power and have done little for the actual realisation of Socialism. Socialism has become very prosaic and the Socialist newspapers very dull. Socialists are not at all inspired by the vision of creating a new world which would replace the old one. In this, Communists clearly have the upper hand. The weakness of the Social-democrats lies in that they have turned into the doctrinaires of democracy. They are moved by the outworn myth of the sovereignty of the people rather than by the Socialist myth of regenerated mankind. They persist in the belief that salvation will come from parliamentary majorities and are out of touch with the life of the working people. They have lost awareness of the well-known fact that bourgeois political democracy has become a victim of a formal conception of freedom, in virtue of which a great number of working people are largely deprived of the fruits of that freedom.

DEMOCRATIC society as a whole must move from a mere recognition of abstract rights and liberties, from the formal principle of legally recorded right of voting and talking to a real freedom which provides life with aim and purpose. The Communists, on the other hand, in their critique of formal freedom and in their preoccupation with concrete possibilities of profiting by freedom, should not destroy freedom altogether. In this dilemma of bourgeois democracy *versus* Communism, however, resides the opportunity for those Socialists who are resolved to overcome the division, and hence the destruction, of freedom in mutually exclusive fractions: the one getting such freedom as legal and political equality may be able to provide and the other such freedom as depends on purposeful living and economic opportunity.

Despite their weakness, the Socialist

parties have certain obvious advantages over the Communists. In the first place, Socialism does not demand a totalitarian view of life. It is a social system which can co-exist with various religious and philosophical beliefs. Socialism does not hold that all means are permitted for the attainment of its ends. It does not propose to achieve a Socialist society by liquidating a certain number of people. Socialism aspires to preserve integral human freedom. Its policy of the socialisation and nationalisation of economic life does not involve a collectivisation of man's personal existence. It does not claim the whole of man, and yet assumes his commitment in, and responsibility for, the life of society. Socialism is by nature and origin syndicalist and, unlike Communism, does not, therefore, allow of an unlimited expansion of the State; it does not depend on methods fit only for the organisation of society in war.

But all these advantages are as nothing if Socialism does not recover the inspired vision of a radically new society and transfigured human relationships. I believe that such a vision can only be born of a religious conviction. Only a 'religious' Socialism can imbue modern society with a dynamic power, although I realise that this is a dream rather than a tangible reality—a dream the significance of which cannot be perceived unless the world experiences a complete spiritual renewal.

Soviet Russia and Russian Communism face the Christian world of the West with a great problem which Christendom has neither solved nor even as yet properly stated. There is nothing more pitiable than attempts to use Christianity as a prop for the dying bourgeois world or to identify it with the maintenance of the *status quo* in politics and economics. Communism will rightly and successfully defy such attempts to justify the unjustifiable. Nor can the Communist challenge be faced by toying with a diluted and half-baked Communism. The problem is rather one of reaching out to those final realities of human existence which alone count as an effective agent in the depth of human behaviour, but from which the

## NICOLAS BERDYAEV

*It was on Good Friday that Nicolas Berdyaev was buried in the little cemetery of Clamart, on the banks of the Seine. He was far away from home; but he had never renounced his homeland. Until the last he believed in the Russian spirit, although he fought the Russian menace. And when he was buried, it was not merely a philosopher or teacher, not even a prophet, so much as the living conscience of the conflict of our time, that was laid to rest.*

*For Berdyaev, and he alone, was part of the two seemingly irreconcilable worlds. He had embraced both in his life; he had accepted none wholly, but he did not reject either completely. It was this that enabled him to see the inter-relation of Communism and Capitalism, of East and West. He recognised Communism for the poison it was, but he was equally convinced that it was born out of the sins of the Christians. The world, therefore, he maintained, was not divided. It was linked—in sin.*

*As a Christian and exiled Westerner, he was ready to bear the cross for the sake of the Russians and the East that had driven him away. And he died convinced that potentially the human soul was capable of separating the truth from the lie and of wedding the truth of one world to the truth of the other. His own formula for organising the new Apocalypse, which he had foreseen when it was not even audible, was simply 'love'. That this formula had worn thin and had proved ineffective did not weaken—it strengthened his case. For it bore out his conviction that man had no right to cease in his duty even if he knew he would fail.*

*This conviction was the greatest heritage Berdyaev bequeathed to a world which he not only wanted to know but also to change. It was not the legacy of a triumphant humanist. Berdyaev was the tragic humanist who stood in the shadow of two conflicting cultures. Yet within himself, within his own contradiction, in his faith in creative ability, he carried*

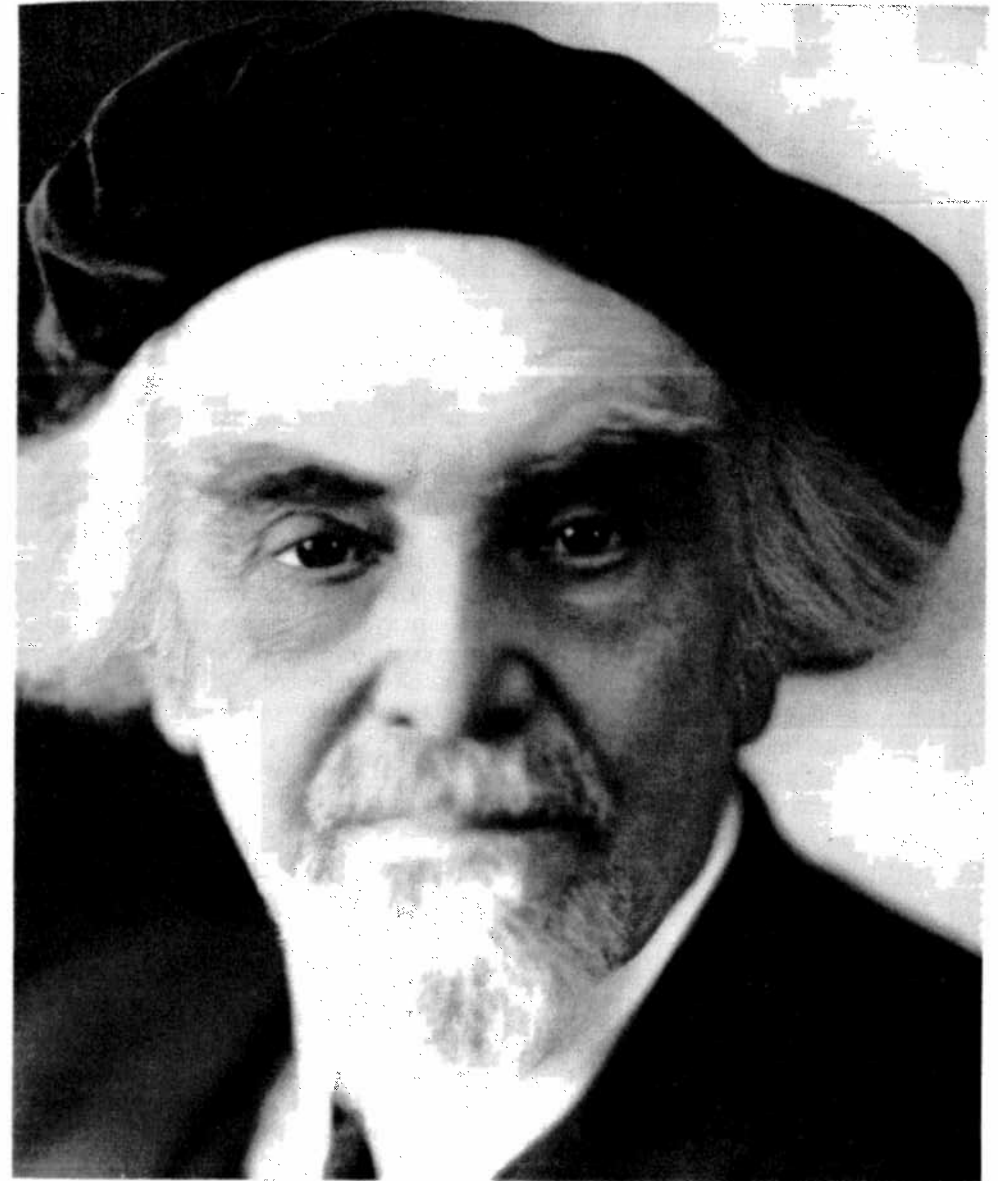
*the promise of the Europe of tomorrow. He himself, in spite of all adverse reality, remained faithful to his belief in the ultimate revelation of the person—the third revelation—in Russia and elsewhere. But it became increasingly difficult for the world at large to follow him. Perhaps that is why Berdyaev, in *The New Mystique*, the book he contemplated and which he was destined not to write, returned to what was probably his deepest inspiration—the mysticism of Jacob Boehme.*

*Berdyaev himself, however, was never overcome by outer circumstances. He was a man of catastrophe who thrived in times of revolution, war or despair. Whenever his tragic prophecy stood fulfilled, he rose with the depth of the crisis. In the last two years of his life he wrote with characteristic, intuitive passion three major works, all still to appear in this country. The last was completed within two months. Five days later, on Tuesday, 23 March, at five in the afternoon, he suddenly collapsed at his desk. I saw the half-smoked cigar, the open Russian Bible and the notes for the new book still lying as he had left them. He died as he had lived: without complaint.*

*This trait distinguished him from thinkers like Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Shestov, with whom he had so much in common. Berdyaev constantly concealed his own suffering. That is, no doubt, why the man and his works, though they 'denied the foundation of the whole world', gave that strange outward appearance of calm and poise.*

*On Easter Sunday, 1948, for the first time since Berdyaev had moved into Clamart, his house was deserted on the day his disciples used to gather around their master. It was a typical Russian atmosphere, with glasses of tea, cigarette smoke, cakes and endless talk. And Berdyaev, with his long white hair underneath a perpetual French beret, looked very much the Russian prophet in the wilderness.*

STEFAN SCHIMANSKI



Socialists of today attempt to hide. The problem is, furthermore, one of purifying the moral atmosphere in which modern society lives. This purification will bring about a substitution of truthfulness and sincerity for the conventional lies, falsehoods and delusions from which our world is perishing. However disadvantageous it may be for the purposes of political tactics and strategy, we shall not deny that there is no freedom in Soviet Russia, or that those who

speak on her behalf often speak on behalf of their own interests and prejudices rather than on behalf of Russia. Nor shall we deny that the claim of the West to be the champion of freedom is often a cloak to cover its own interests and its innate hostility not only to Communist Russia but to Russia as such—which hostility cannot but impair the development of freedom in the Soviet Union. All are guilty and must admit their share in the common guilt. We must discard once

and for all the complacent black-and-white logic in dealing with these matters.

It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that the tragic division of the world into a Western and an Eastern bloc cannot possibly be understood as a polarisation into a kingdom of light and a kingdom of darkness, of good and evil. There is both light and darkness, and good and evil in each of us. Such a dividing of the world into two parts prepares hell for the one and Heaven

for the other, i.e., for one's own, and expresses the desire of 'the good' to comfort themselves with the thought of hell as an eternal prison-house in which 'the wicked' are isolated, so that 'the good' may flourish. I am not implying that evil is non-existent or inactive, but its existence and activity is far removed from these human, all-too-human, mythological constructions.

A unification of the world or a federation of the peoples which—deliberately or not—



BERDYAEV (continued from page 37)

excludes Russia is no unification at all. It would, on the contrary, signify the consolidation of a disintegrated world. There must be a *third way* which, far from making us look at the present historical conflict as at a spectacle to be contemplated from a box, accepts this conflict as a challenge and opportunity and is yet intent on transcending its dead ends. This Way will probably, on the social level, assume some form of Socialism. But it will involve above all a radical spiritual transformation in the sphere of human relationships: and we must fight for this. A real reconciliation of East and West is impossible and inconceivable on the basis of a materialistic Communism, or of a materialistic Capitalism, or indeed of a materialistic Socialism. The 'third way' will neither be 'anti-Communist' nor 'anti-capitalist'. It will recognise the truth in *liberal democracy*, and it will equally recognise the truth in Communism. A critique of Communism and Marxism does not entail enmity towards Soviet Russia, just as a critique of liberal democracy does not entail enmity towards the West.

Those who refuse to adhere to either of the blocs into which the world is divided are generally accused of sitting between two stools. This well-worn accusation seems to be based on the peculiar assumption that there exist only two stools in the world. But why not a third one? I for one am perfectly happy to sit on it and do not intend to move to either of the two. The argument against the 'third way' proceeds from the belief that there is, in fact, no way out of the division of the world into two parts. In other words, it accepts war as inevitable. But, however threateningly the war may loom before us, we must refuse to accept the assumptions of despair and to be infected in our judgments by the psychology and the ethics of war.

But the final and most important justification of a 'third way' is that there must be a place from which we may boldly testify to, and proclaim, truth, love and justice. No one today likes truth: utility and self-interest have long ago been substituted for truth.

I believe that, e.g., the Soviet Government is often right in the position it takes or in the demands it makes *vis-à-vis* the West; but I cannot accept the falsification of means which it deems necessary in the pursuit of its policy. This raises the moral problem of means and ends, with which I cannot, however, deal in this article. It is thought in some quarters that lying may be a sacred activity if it promotes good ends: it is this, in fact, which is demanded of those who are driven to choose between the either-or of the two blocs. . . . We live in a nightmare of falsehoods, and there are few who are sufficiently awake and aware to see things as they are. Our first duty is to clear away illusions and recover a sense of reality. If war should come, it will do so on account of our delusions, for which our hag-ridden conscience attempts to find moral excuses. To recover a sense of reality is to recover the truth about ourselves and the world in which we live, and thereby to gain the power of keeping this world from flying asunder.

(Translated by Dr. E. Lampert)

CALDER-MARSHALL (continued from page 50) who have capital reserves are making in some cases enormous contributions to the Exchequer. A novel which gets the jackpot in the United States may bring in \$500,000 or more. That as the contribution of one individual, using a couple of typewriter ribbons and a ream or two of paper, is not to be despised. If Literature were scheduled for development, to use the gross official language to cover what no bureaucrat would consider feasible, 'if writers were encouraged instead of being driven by the high cost of living into hack-work and mulcted of their capital as soon as they accumulate any', one of the by-products would be that more British books would be published in the States and fewer mediocre American books published here. To the Treasury, this may be the most important consideration in the Society of Authors' scheme; to the Society itself, the main object is the enrichment of our national literature, to produce contemporary books which can stand beside the finest of the past.

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