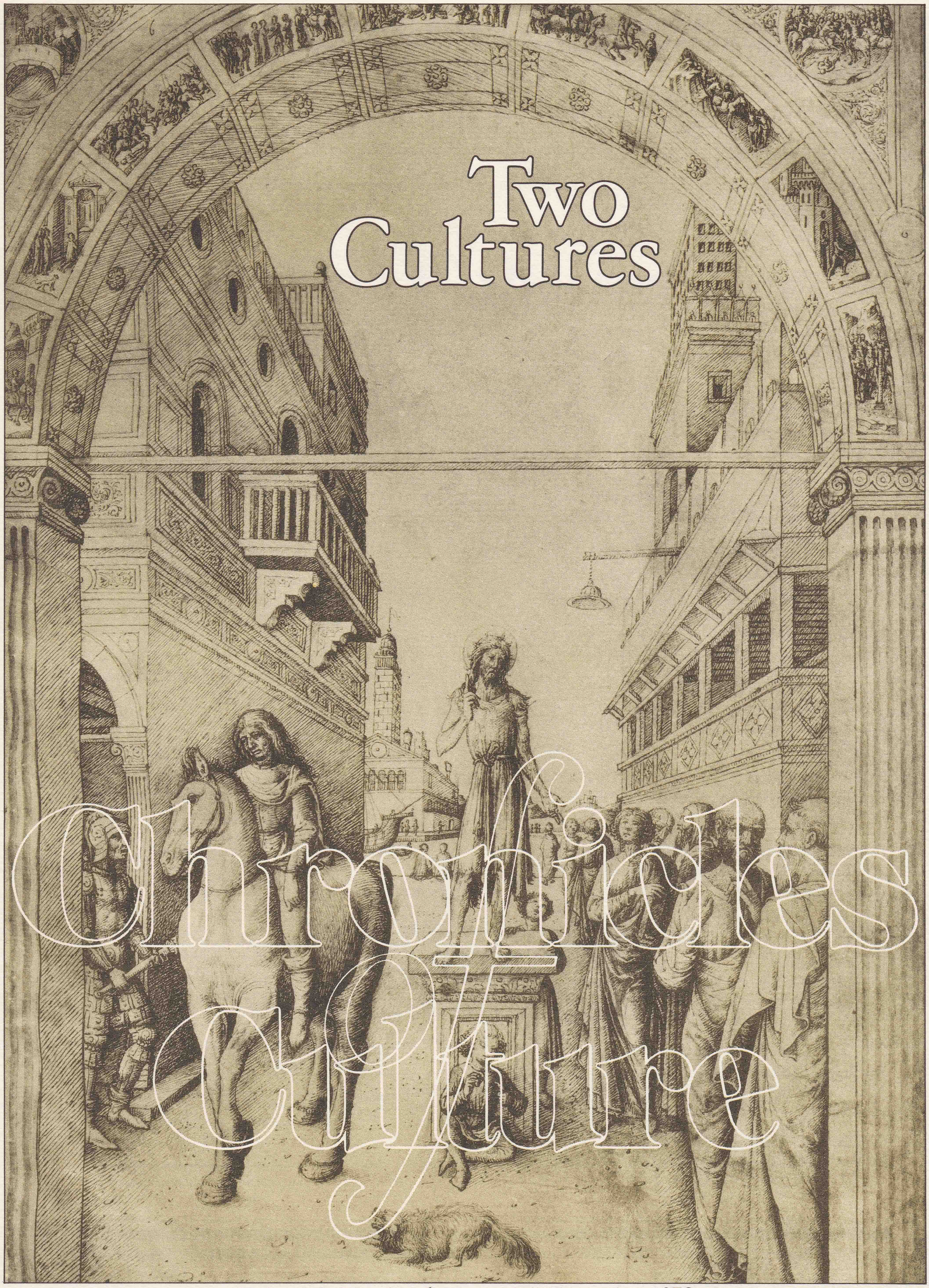

Two Cultures

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Lord Snow on Art & Life

C. P. Snow: *The Realists;* Charles Scribner's Sons; New York.

by Dain A. Trafton

It is disappointing not to be able to recommend C. P. Snow's *The Realists:* the author's name and preface promise a better book; the subject deserves one. The "realists" to whom the title refers are eight of the greatest novelists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Stendhal, Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Galdós, Henry James and Proust. According to the preface, those masters have much to teach us about both art and life. Their understanding that the "primal impulse" to tell a good story lies at the heart of good novel writing reproves the modern tendency to disregard plot and "to compose novels as verbal puzzles to be worked out by persons cleverer than the original writers." Even more important, through the realists' subtle renderings of character and society, they enhance our self-knowledge and our sensitivity to the world around us. Their art instructs. So do their lives. And the preface offers to show us that "a writer's life is not just connected with his work; it cannot be separated from it." As a distinguished novelist himself, with an unusually varied experience in science, letters and public life, Lord Snow might seem ideally qualified to develop these themes. If he had done so in the literate but popular manner that is his forte, he would have written a book of real value. He would have made a contribution to public taste by directing readers of novels back to the great works that establish the standards for the art. To read Cheever, Pynchon, Bellow, or Updike with *The Red and the Black, Great Expectations, The Brothers Karamazov* or *War and Peace* in mind provides a salutary perspective. The best of what is being done today is interesting but not great. Lord Snow might have illuminated this fact and stimulated reflection upon its causes. Unfortunately, *The Realists* falls far beneath its possibilities. What might have been a useful book turned out superficial, muddled, and at times downright silly.

The body of the book consists of eight essays, one on each writer. They are loose, chatty mixtures of fact, speculation and opinion. Occasionally they interest and amuse, but the level of information and understanding rarely rises above what one would expect in a good encyclopedia. The themes announced in the preface function only intermittently in the essays themselves, and as a result the notion that we can learn something of importance from these writers soon dissipates in a welter of random observations: Stendhal did well at school; he liked mathematics; he lacked ambition in the civil service; he had a thick neck, and his legs were "not long enough"; he suffered from unrequited love; he was devoted to his mother; he was "far from impotent"; and so on, and so on. Perhaps such details might be shown to possess a significance beyond themselves; Lord Snow seems to love them aimlessly, for their own sake. They lead him to no insight into Stendhal's character, nor do they help us to understand his work. Indeed, Lord Snow's discussion of Stendhal's masterpieces makes no effort to relate them seriously to his life. We are told, for example, that Julien Sorel—the hero of *The Red and the Black*—is "the first voice of ultimate class hatred in a major work of literature," and that "Stendhal identified himself with Julien." However, nothing in the account of Stendhal's life prepares us to see him as an apostle of class hatred. On the contrary, Lord Snow asserts that the author of *The Charterhouse of Parma* "would have liked to be an Italian aristocrat." Possibly class hatred and the desire to be an Italian aristocrat can be made compatible, but one would like to be shown how. In fact, Lord Snow's view of the role of class in *The Red and the Black* is unconvincing—and left wholly unsubstantiated. Class hatred cannot explain Julien's ultimate motivation, and in any case he does not enjoy the uncritical sympathy of his creator. Given Lord Snow's interpretation, however, one must raise a question. Why has he chosen to praise the "realism" of a novel that he believes to be inspired by class hatred? What lesson are we to derive from this?

Similar examples of superficiality and incoherence occur plentifully in every chapter, but nowhere is the book's failure more evident than in the chapters on Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. As figures of the very highest authority in world literature, they stand out even among the other great "realists," and the remarkable features of their lives—Dostoevsky's youthful career as a revolutionary, his compulsive gambling, his emergence as a spokesman for conservatism; Tolstoy's transformation from dissolute young aristocrat into prophet of moral reform—make them especially suited to an analysis that blends biography with literary criticism. Furthermore, both require special interpretation because they challenge so radically the values that prevail in Europe and America today. Both rejected utterly the scientific, commercial, democratic and "progressive" culture of liberal Europe. To both, the liberalism that grew out of the Enlightenment seemed antagonistic to religion and a healthy political and social order; and while the details of their programs differ, both men sought to restore an essentially Christian polity. In this, they shocked nineteenth-century intellectuals much as another great Russian novelist—Solzhenitsyn—shocks our own. Lord Snow simply declines the task of trying to

come to grips with the "realism" and the importance for our time of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. He contents himself with a few facts and platitudes, spiced with a great deal of gossip about the sex lives of the great men. The facts, although sparse, seem to be accurate; the gossip is mostly silly; but the platitudes can mislead. For example, in discussing the Grand Inquisitor section of *The Brothers Karamazov,* Lord Snow uncritically adopts the existentialist-leftist tradition that stresses Ivan Karamazov's hatred of God, and ignores the religious affirmation that derives from Dostoevsky's overall design. A distortion of this kind, or the distortion of *The Red and the Black* mentioned earlier, coupled with the general triviality of approach throughout, makes one wonder about Lord Snow's preparation, or motives. Did he fail to study his material with sufficient care? Is he unaware of what other critics have done? Or is he engaged in an effort to make what he has to say conform to the taste of his audience? Is he more concerned with mimicking the thoughts that his readers already accept than with trying to lead them to conceptions that are different, older and more difficult? In any case, *The Realists* has nothing important to teach about either art or life. □

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