VOLUME VI, NO. 41
OCTOBER 14, 1953

BOOKS FOR OUR TIME: VII

THE only way, it seemed, by which Dwight Macdonald's *The Root Is Man* could be brought to our reading public was by furthering the project of its publication. This MANAS did, in collaboration with its cooperative printer, Cunningham Press: a costly and time-consuming project, involving months of preparatory labor, fitted into whatever time remained after remunerative work.

While this was in process, MANAS editors naturally wondered at times if these writings of Macdonald's were, after all, as lastingly important as they had been taken to be, and needed quite so much to be resurrected from the near oblivion of the now defunct magazine, *Politics.* (This reaction, or something like it, has set in each time the writer of this series turns to actual discussion of one of the books on the "chosen" list. Thus far, though, each book seems to live for us all over again when we re-read it, so it is natural to feel that at least some of our readers will be in accord with our extreme praise of the volumes selected for "Books for Our Time.")

We don't wonder any more about the unusual value of *Root,* either, after the frequent re-reading called for in preparing for printing the original articles and the new material supplied by the author. Helping to make this work available is one of the best things we've done, in our opinion. One can really use to some point those tired words "provocative" and "challenging" in describing the two "radical" essays contained in *The Root,* and, without the perspectives they afford, and the often ignored political facts succinctly presented, the "Books for Our Time" series would, we feel, lack a necessary ingredient.

For once, then, we have something to sell, through the agency of the aforementioned Cunningham Press, and are willing to try to cajole, entice or browbeat as many MANAS readers as possible into purchasing copies. (For this sewed, paper-bound edition, the price is $2.00; order from The Cunningham Press, 3036 West Main Street, Alhambra, Calif.; California buyers please add sales tax.) The "enticement" approach, of course, is always most desirable, and to that end we shall provide a number of samples of Macdonald's style and subject-matter.

Our last review, concerned with Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station,* suggested that Wilson's historical survey was excellent preparation for Macdonald, especially among readers lacking a background in Marxist thought. Macdonald, a man who refuses to be a conventional moralist but who nevertheless sees moral issues everywhere around him—and often of a subtlety which the majority of writers miss—has had a long history of association with Marxist thought and Marxist political affiliation. Such experience, we should contend, is of considerable value. As a "moralist," Marx was unquestionably justified in many of his conclusions about the evils of "capitalist" society, and he is to be respected for the zeal with which he set out to inspire a revolution of liberation, however his ends and means became confused. Macdonald, we think, appreciates the things about Marx which should be appreciated, and, because a sympathy remains in him for some of the original *intentions* of the Marxist movement, he becomes one of those best able to discuss how it was that a number of the tragic over-simplifications of Marxist orthodoxy came to permeate the thought of Europe.

Certain of Marx's untenable assumptions, it is made clear, were also the distorted assumptions of Hitlerian ethics—part of the subject for Macdonald's first essay, called "The Responsibility of Peoples." He here demonstrates that the greatest of all political delusions is the idea that responsibility may be assigned to nations or

classes—a Marxist assumption which we non-Marxists have usually ended by adopting, along with the "scientific-determinist" assumption, also Marxist, that the individual cannot be "responsible" for himself, since his personal moral sense has been constructed and his motivations determined by the societal grouping to which he belongs. Most of the intellectuals and political planners have been following these lines of belief for some time, not without result. The result has been that we have finally created a society in which individuals really *are not* responsible in the way they might have been in a less mechanized social order. Macdonald summarizes this trend:

> More and more, things happen TO people. Modern society has become so tightly organized, so rationalized and routinized that it has the character of a mechanism which grinds on without human consciousness or control. The individual, be he "leader" or mass-man, is reduced to powerlessness vis-à-vis the mechanism. It is a process, furthermore, which is also going on in our own society.

When a man acts merely as the unit of a mass—when he is no longer apt to exercise any moral responsibility at all—it is useless to proclaim that there is any just punishment for an erring "nation," or "class." In the context of a group, all of whose members suffer from an assured self-righteousness, for instance, one may hardly be conscious of any "wrong-doing" not classified as such in the community, however obvious and glaring the offense may be to others. The Germans of the death-camp days, the Russians of today, and ourselves, have here a great deal in common, differing only in specific situation and in degree.

The common ground, unfortunately, is the attitude of irresponsibility itself, into which it becomes easy to drift. In some instances the motions of the socio-political mechanism make a complete mockery of "free" choice in the individual, while in other instances "free choices" may actually be made, although with great difficulty. As an instance of the former, Macdonald cites the case, previously described by George Orwell, of two Tibetans who were pressed into military service in the Russian army. Later they were captured by the Nazis and transferred to the Western front to defend "the Fatherland," and were there captured, in turn, by the British. It was finally discovered that the two prisoners (or were they "allies"?) spoke neither Russian, German nor English, and therefore had not the slightest idea whom they were fighting for, or whom they were fighting against, or why.

A step down from this extreme is the case of three hundred American Negro sailors, blown to bits while loading munitions at Mare Island, California. The reigning Admiral, in an Order of the Day, cited all the three hundred for "heroism," yet it is also of clear record that these "heroes" had wished to be anywhere else but where they were, felt little enthusiasm for the prosecution of the white man's war, and most emphatically had no ambitions to make headlines, dead or alive, in an "Order of the Day."

When the allies occupied Germany they discovered all manner of curious complexities, such as the case of a man who had served as paymaster in one of the infamous death camps. He protested that *he* was guilty of no atrocity, that he had simply followed orders, and if he had not obeyed would himself have been executed or been removed to a concentration camp. (The allies undoubtedly hanged him anyway, which brought the same result in the long run, but his protesting voice raised an issue which the Nuremberg trials found it impossible to settle.)

Macdonald also quotes a 1944 *New Yorker* profile of a 22-year-old Air Force lieutenant who had just completed thirty bombing missions over Europe:

> "Whatever I tell you," he said to the interviewer, "boils down to this: I'm a cog in one hell of a big machine. The more I think about it, and I've thought about it a lot lately, the more it looks as if I'd been a cog in one thing after another since the day I was born. Whenever I get set to do what I want to do, something a whole lot bigger than me comes along and shoves me back into place."

When Macdonald writes about the Polish death camps, about the dangerous moral oversimplifications of Marxism, and when he discusses the atom bomb and mentions those few unusual men of science who as human beings refused to further its evolution, we discover that he is really writing about dilemmas in which both he and ourselves are continually placed—also as human beings. It is in this sense that we may regard Macdonald, to borrow from the publishers' introduction, as "slashing into thickets of moral and ideological confusion with the enthusiasm of a pioneer."

When one accompanies a "slasher into thickets," by the way, he had better be prepared to suffer a certain amount of laceration, and this is apt to be the fate of the orthodox patriot who follows Macdonald's arguments. For it is forcibly suggested that the prosecution of war today tends to make us *all* accessories to crime, with the possible exception of those who are so "radical" as to refuse to accept any role in The Process. The "knight in shining armor" concept of military heroism is obsolete, as Macdonald shows in this merciless if just commentary on American obliteration bombings. He writes:

> In the last month of the war, the American air force destroyed in two nights the city of Dresden: one of the loveliest collections of architecture in Europe, a city of no military significance and with no war industry to speak of, a city that at the time was crammed with civilian refugees from the East, hundreds of thousands of whom died under the American firebombs. Yet I venture to say that very few of the Americans who planned and executed this atrocity felt any special hatred of the churches and refugees they destroyed. Nor do the airlift personnel today feel any special love for the Berliners they are feeding. There is indeed a logic to both actions, but it is not a human, not a rational or ethical logic. It is rather the logic of a social mechanism which has grown so powerful that human beings have become simply its instruments.
>
> Such a viewpoint is chill and uncomfortable. Hence the importance of political mythologists who "humanize" these vast impersonal processes by injecting good and evil concepts into them. So in the last war it was possible to convince many Americans—especially those who had been to college and there had acquired the dangerous knack of thinking in general terms—that the German people were the accomplices rather than the first victims of Hitler; that they were collectively responsible for the Nazi horrors. To construct this myth required much re-writing and re-interpretation of history, in the style of the Soviet Politburo, to show that the Germans have been militaristic since Tacitus. It was also necessary to ignore such facts as that the concentration camps up to 1939 were filled with Germans, and only with Germans, that the majority of Germans in 1933 voted against Hitler, and that the existence of the great death-camps of 1943-45 was carefully concealed from the German people. It was also necessary to ignore the fact, above all, that there is only one kind of person who can be expected to resist the policy of a totalitarian state like Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia; namely, the hero.
>
> Heroism, like artistic talent, has always been a rare quality. To expect the average German—or American—to be a hero is about as reasonable as to demand that he be a poet. The absurdity of this whole approach appears in the fact that today the same Berliners who were denounced three years ago as cowards and sadists because they didn't "stop Hitler," are now presented as a race of heroes because they are resisting Russian pressure. The only Germans who can be called heroes are those in the Soviet zone who are actively fighting against the Russians. There aren't many of them, just as there weren't many Frenchmen who took part in the Resistance, and just as there would not be many Americans who would resist a native fascism once it got its repressive apparatus functioning. Heroes just aren't very common, that's all. And nothing is more vulgar than the type of liblab journalist or scholar—like Thomas Mann, for example, or the late editors of *PM*—who demand of others a heroism which it is doubtful, putting it charitably, that they themselves possess.

We *can* consider man, individual man, as "responsible," however, at the moment when he becomes a radical—one, that is, who has decided that, for him, what has been called "the age of fundamentals" must begin again, that neither the accepted canons nor the compulsions of behavior provided by society are acceptable as bases for his action.

The publishers' introductory note to *The Root Is Man* calls attention to the temper of Macdonald's debate with himself and his contemporaries on the issue of pacifism. In the context of a discussion of ethical "responsibility," this subject could hardly be avoided, and Macdonald's remarks are apt to be thought-provoking to the reader, just as they were to the publishers, who say:

> The crucial importance of individual integrity in an age of mass decisions is central in Macdonald's writing, and here, we think, lies the power of his work. Our point is that a man who starts out with this conviction will produce discoveries of value, whatever his stance *vis à vis* the typical "positions" or "sides" in social and moral debate. Macdonald the wartime pacifist quite possibly taught his radical contemporaries far more than they learned in any other quarter; and Macdonald the "peacetime" non-pacifist may be more instructive to pacifists, today—if they will read him—than their most respected leaders who remain in citadels of absolute war rejection.
>
> This work, in short, is a work on the nature of man—a region of inquiry which should take precedence over the controversy about pacifism. There are pacifists who honor human beings, and pacifists who do not. There are non-pacifists who respect their fellow men, and non-pacifists who are wholly indifferent to them. Thus a side taken in this controversy may be of profound importance, or it may mean nothing at all. The root, we repeat with Macdonald, is man, and it is this root that we need to understand.

During World War II, Mr. Macdonald became convinced, for reasons which will become apparent even from the brief quotations here included, that he could not in good faith support prosecution of the war. His reasons for becoming a "conscientious objector," unlike those of a great number of pacifists, were cogently integrated with his judgment of the then world situation; his pacifism was an expression of what he proposed as a constructive line of political action, rather than the result of an emotional repugnance or a religious inhibition against taking part in war. Now, as is also made clear in the footnotes to this edition of *The Root,* Macdonald confesses a change of belief—at least so far as the immediate future is concerned. Thus he becomes a very rare sort of person indeed—one who was a *wartime* pacifist, and is now a *peacetime* supporter of continuing American military power.

Usually, and certainly with most intellectuals, the pattern is reversed, with the lofty humanitarian pretensions of peacetime quickly dissolving when the emotions attending a war situation begin to boil. What we wish to admire especially about *The Root* is that both as a pacifist and non-pacifist Macdonald emphasizes the immediate ethical and political relevance of conscientious objection. Very few pacifists have views which are capable of discussion in wholly rational terms, but Macdonald's pacifism was and is; likewise his present modification of a pacifist view is in part but a further probing of issues often obscured by more ideological exponents of pacifist faith.

Here we should like to return for a moment to an idea found in Erich Fromm's *Psychoanalysis and Religion,* as perhaps explaining something about "pacifism" which we feel Macdonald helps to make clear. Fromm discusses religious experience in general in one of his later chapters, and after describing the tendency in all humanitarian religions to express an ethical ideal by the aspiration of "becoming one with the All," he writes: "The religious attitude in this sense is simultaneously the fullest experience of individuality and of its opposite; it is not so much a blending of the two as a polarity from whose tension religious experience springs." Perhaps, in times of stress and violence—times of the testing of every conceivable sort of loyalty, whether it be to one's principles or to one's fellow men—the truth of what *The Bhagavad-Gita* calls "right action" can only be born from a dynamic tension between pacifism and what the *Gita* denominates the "warrior spirit" in man. The maximum of either political and ethical enlightenment may "spring" from a difficult union between the truth of pacifism and that other truth men feel themselves to be serving when they fight for the

preservation of freedom. What matters is not so much the discovery of a course of action which is "right" for everyone, but the discovery that there are two dimensions of value in the war equation, both valid even though paradoxically opposed and both meriting profound reflection if the "truth" of right action is to emerge for the individual.

We now let Macdonald explain how, in his view, the *karma* of western history has actually brought ethical and practical considerations into close proximity on the war issue the convenient but illusory separation of the two characteristics of most thinking in the past becoming increasingly difficult. Simone Weil once wrote that "modern war appears as a struggle led by all the State apparatuses and their general staffs against all men old enough to bear arms. . . . The great error of nearly all studies of war ... has been to consider war as an episode in foreign policies, when it is especially an act of interior politics, and the most atrocious act of all." Macdonald elaborates, calling attention to the fact that in this context no ideological front can longer be said to represent the cause of the "common man":

> The common peoples of the world are coming to have less and less control over the policies of "their" governments, while at the same time they are being more and more closely identified with those governments. Or to state it in slightly different terms: as the common man's *moral* responsibility diminishes (assuming agreement that the degree of moral responsibility is in direct proportion to the degree of freedom of choice), his *practical* responsibility increases. Not for many centuries have individuals been at once so powerless to influence what is done by the national collectivities to which they belong, and at the same time so generally held responsible for what is done by those collectivities.
>
> Where can the common peoples look for relief from this intolerable agonizing contradiction? Not to their traditional defender, the labor movement. This no longer exists in Russia, and in the two great bourgeois democracies, it has quite lost touch with the humane and democratic ideals it once believed in.

If no traditional groups or political fronts represent "the cause of the common man," he can only be represented by those scattered individuals who deviate from the party lines of mass movements. In this context, the deviator from political norms becomes a person of great consequence, not because he "influences" the course of events in the usual way, but because he represents the only way in which the reference-points of human choice can possibly be altered. In this connection we will encounter paragraphs such as the following in the first essay, "The Responsibility of Peoples," wherein Macdonald voices an opinion which becomes increasingly valid with reflection upon it:

> It is not the law-breaker we must fear today so much as he who obeys the law. The Germans have long been noted for their deep respect for law and order. This foible, which one could smile at as an amiable weakness in the past, has assumed a sinister aspect under the Nazis. One of the most hopeful auguries for the future of this country, with the Permanent War Economy taking shape, is that we Americans have a long and honorable tradition of lawlessness and disrespect for authority.

It is Macdonald's characteristic intent to show that ethical idealism, personal integrity, and deviationism are close relatives. In contrast to "the Progressives, the Marxists, and the Deweyans," he argues the inadequacy of all forms of thinking which assume that ethical values can be derived from statistical analysis of the "good" things as inevitably being the things that "most people" want:

> If the assumption is questioned, it soon becomes clear that "Man" means "most people of the time and place we are talking about," and that the "normal" or "natural" as defined in this statistical way is what one *ought* to want. It is understandable that their answer should take a quantitative form since science deals only in measurable quantities. But if what most people want is one's criterion of value, then there is no problem involved beyond ascertaining what in fact people *do* want—a question that can indeed be answered by science, but not the one we started out with. For this answer simply raises the original question in different form: why *should* one want what most people want? The very contrary would seem to be the case: those who have taught us what we know about ethics, from Socrates and Christ to Tolstoy, Thoreau, and Gandhi, have usually wanted precisely

> what most people of their time did *not* want, and have often met violent death for that reason.

If such passages seem calculated to delight the antiscientific defenders of religion, we can only say that Macdonald definitely does not belong in this camp, either. In fact, he parts company with the religionists for the same reason that he declines to identify himself with any reigning political orthodoxy—since certain beliefs and value judgments are expected as a consequence of the belonging. Granting his lack of professional proficiency as a philosopher, Macdonald excuses his "daring" to comment on philosophical subjects by wondering if both philosophical and religious issues might not be clarified through fresh attempts by amateur philosophers who decide to forego the opinions of "experts" and to think things out for themselves. Macdonald shies away from the concept of God, incidentally, while he is perfectly willing to grant that there *are* intuitive insights into the problems of ethics which are not invalidated by lack of immediate empirical confirmation.

Before we return to Macdonald's conclusion—and he finally leaves his readers with suggestions we regard as a cut above vague ethical counsels—it is necessary to give at least some attention to one of the major accomplishments of *The Root*. Macdonald, as we have said, explores the psychological dynamics of Marxist Communism. He sees in Communism not a separate ideological entity, but rather an embodiment of a general mind-set in regard to the nature of man and the goals of society, which has gradually been woven into nearly every aspect of modern thinking. However important it may conceivably be to recognize the present political manifestation of "Communism" in Russia as a threat to the freedom of the human spirit, the ideas and attitudes which have fostered this development should be our chief concern. Marx was like a prism, focussing the light—in this case, we should say, a half-light—of certain conclusions about man's past history, and whether or not one "abhors" Marx and the Soviets, he may ultimately discover in himself some unwelcome intellectual affinities for both. Macdonald explains:

> Both in culture and in politics, Marxism today exercises an extraordinary influence. In the "social sciences," the historical-materialist approach first developed by Marx is widely accepted. Many workers in these fields who would be horrified at the idea of being Marxists nonetheless think in the tradition he established—filtered down (and watered down) through more "respectable" thinkers, as, for example, Weber and Mannheim in sociology. As for the influence of Marxism in world politics today, I have already tried to show that in detail.
>
> This strange flickering-up of Marxist concepts, at a time when Marx's ethical aims are in ashes, is the afterglow of a great historical period that is going down in darkness. Marxism is the most profound expression of what has been the dominant theme in Western culture since the 18th century: the belief that the advance of science, with the resulting increase of man's mastery over nature, is the climax of a historical pattern of Progress. If we have come to question this pattern, before we can find any *new* roads, we must first reject the magnificent system which Marx elaborated on its basis. A break with a whole cultural tradition is involved, and Marxism looms up as the last and greatest systematic defense of that tradition. We who reject Marxism are indebted to Marx for the very fact that the boldness and intellectual grandeur of his work make it possible for us to formulate more dearly our own position in the process of distinguishing it from his; this is the service which any great thinker renders to his critics. I know of no better way to come to the heart of our modern dilemma than by showing the defects of the Marxian solution.

And now to the conclusion of Macdonald's arguments which, as with everything else upon which comment here is attempted, should be read in the full context provided by the author. We can, however, indicate our feeling, after Macdonald's analysis, that the terrifying complexities of politics can be reduced to simple, human, and, for those peculiar individuals who find themselves at home in deviationism, even heartwarming, terms. Men need new sorts of communities to live in, communities inspired by the noninstitutional approach, for communities of ideas may yet turn out to be more "practical" than

efforts to create better conditions of human existence by managerial means.

"From all this one thing seems to follow," summarizes Macdonald. "We must reduce political action to a modest, unpretentious, personal level—one that is real in the sense that it satisfies, here and now, the psychological needs, and the ethical values of the particular persons taking part in it. We must begin way at the bottom again, with small groups of individuals in various countries, grouped around certain principles and feelings they have in common. These should probably not be physically isolated communities as was the case in the 19th century since this shuts one off from the common experience of one's fellowmen. They should probably consist of individuals—*families*, rather—who live and make their living in the everyday world but who come together often enough and intimately enough to form a *psychological* (as against a geographical) community." Members of such "communities of ideas," along with sharing some understanding of what constitutes effective political action in the modern world, "will think in human, not class terms":

> This means they will free themselves from the Marxian fetishism of the masses, preferring to be able to speak modest meaningful truths to a small audience rather than grandiose empty formulae to a big one. This also means, for the moment, turning to the intelligentsia as one's main supporters, collaborators and audience, on the assumption that what we are looking for represents so drastic a break with past traditions of thinking and behaving that at this early stage only a few crackpots and eccentrics, (i.e., intellectuals) will understand what we're talking about, or care about it at all. We may console ourselves that all new social movements, including Marxism, have begun this way: with a few intellectuals rather than at the mass level.

Letter from ENGLAND

LONDON.—Since Carlyle did not disdain to seek a philosophy in clothes your correspondent may feel some justification in making that the subject of this letter. Clothes, Shakespeare asserts through the mouth of Polonius, oft-times proclaim the man, and there is now proceeding in England a vogue which is something more than mere foible and the trade boost for innovation for innovation's sake; nor does the subject here concern feminine fashions, but, on the contrary, those of the modern Englishman.

Only a few years ago, because of clothes rationing, it became, if not fashionable, customary, to wear old clothes with leather patched elbows and cuffs and redone seats. Odd jackets and trousers were commonplace and men sported their shabbiness with a certain sense of bravado. Now all that has changed. The austerities of the war and immediate post-war period, are over. Clothing is no longer rationed, either by government decree or by the fantastic prices which followed on the end of the official ration.

Little by little men began to dress well again and so the city took on a less drab and down-at-heels air. Now has come a curious change and one, so far as your correspondent can recall over more than half a century, without any parallel in our social history. *Men are reverting to the fashions of a century ago.* Mainly, the movement is most notable among the younger men of fashion. The middle-aged also follow in limited numbers: only the elderly and old decline to indulge this curious sartorial fancy.

A few days ago, your correspondent noticed a figure emerging from the Arts Theatre, near Piccadilly. A middle-aged man, he was got up, in every particular, like a man of fashion of 1850. He sported skintight small check trousers, a cutaway coat with braid and sleeve cuffs, a stick-up collar and cravat and a strange curly high hat. To complete the effect, he wore full mutton-chop whiskers and a heavy handle-bar moustache. His model was any beau as depicted in the pages of *Punch* of a century ago.

Bond Street is London's fashion parade. And there, nowadays, one can come on these curiously dressed men, with their tight trousers and strange curly-brim hats and long, back-brushed hair meeting in a vertical line at the back of the head.

One might write this off as a social phenomenon too trivial to warrant comment. But can one? Personally, I think this harking back to mid-Victorian fashions in the age of the jet-engined aeroplane a psychological riddle with an underlying profound significance: if one could only guess what that significance could be! It is so easy to fall back on the psychological clichés—Oh, my dear chap, this is pure escapism—and so forth. But from what is it desired to escape, and how can a harking back to the fashions of a century ago assist?

Perhaps for your readers to appreciate the impact made by these strange figures on the London streets today, it is necessary to suggest what would be the average American's reactions were he to come upon a number of citizens dressed precisely as Lincoln dressed.

Beside this really very strange and, possibly, pathological sartorial regression, the present battle of the fashion houses of London and Paris over whether women shall wear short or long skirts, assumes the small dimensions of a minor social controversy. This morning I asked my barber whether he thought this new style would carry the field. He replied: "Well, the young fellows may take it, but I can't see you doing so." By which he meant, of course, that with age comes circumspection, even in the matter of dress, in which, the golden rule, as elsewhere, remains what it always has been: namely, moderation, and, again, moderation.

Perhaps this brief letter will draw from a reader versed in the psychology of clothes some plausible theory for this strange change in the dress of our younger citizens.

ENGLISH CORRESPONDENT

REVIEW
PLATONIC MEMORIES

GEORGE GODWIN'S *Lake of Memory* was brought to our attention by a reader who recalled our lead article, "Wonders of Memory" (MANAS, July 8), and remarked that the English novelist's story is founded on the Platonic theory of memory, or reminiscence. So, securing four issues of the *Adelphi* (in which the story appeared), we read the *Lake of Memory*. Godwin seems to have come upon his interest in the Platonic doctrine of "soul memory" directly, without much influence from later sources. At any rate, the story flows along from a plainly Platonic inspiration. It has four parts. The first gives account of a sybaritic banquet at the home of a wealthy Athenian. He and a few chosen guests while away an evening, then the night, until morning finds them sated, but still playing at philosophizing. One guest, a disciple of Socrates, sees a ship home-coming from its ritual voyage—the ship whose return is to mark the day of Socrates' death—and is brought to his senses (or abstracted from their power) by his grief. Then follows a lament for Athens, that Socrates must die. But dying, will he live again? This is Godwin's theme.

Strangely but naturally enough, this theme is not revived except as through a veil in the remaining three installments. The next part deals with the life of a Crusader—his life, his love, his misfortune, and his curious alliance with the religious life and his liberation therefrom. The third tale is of a girl kidnapped and taken adventuring by a buccaneer of the time of Henry Morgan. The concluding piece relates the story of a self-reliant American girl who manages to take her dead father's place in a company of gold-seeking 49'ers, traveling to California, where she meets various adventures. Here, after an earthquake which lays San Francisco in ruins (the quake of 1856), comes a return to the original theme:

> Presently, she saw smoke rising from the embers of fires still unextinguished a week after the catastrophe. But, she thought: The city will rise again from its ashes, like the Phaenix bird from the fire.
>
> And she considered sorrowfully: because of the corruption of a city a good and noble man lies dead. And certain words came to her inner ear, remote but clear. . . . And if we reflect in another way we shall see that we may well hope that death is a good. For the state of death is one of two things: either the dead man wholly ceases to be, and loses all sensation; or according to the common belief, it is a change and a migration of the soul into another place. She then remembered. One day he had taken a book and read aloud. . . .

So, we are left in doubt. Is the girl the disciple of Socrates, re-embodied? And did she "remember" Socrates' last words concerning the folly of sorrowing for the dead, especially the good dead? It does not matter. Whether she remembered, or remembered in another way that the man she admired, now shot down in bravado by a criminal, had read to her out of Plato's dialogues, the secret wondering goes on, like a quiet inward chant, lightening the world.

Godwin has not attempted to exploit the glamor of reincarnation by depicting a pat succession of existences. Pervading these tales, rather, is a mood—the kind of mood that might have been felt, and lived out, in the Middle Ages, in the seventeenth century, and a hundred years ago in America. Godwin is after the essences of life, supposing the Platonic theory of immortality be true, and is not pushing a doctrine to find for it believers.

In the forest, the Crusader, downcast at his wife's death and his own selfishness toward her, meets a jongleur. The singing youth recites a tale which the knight, being unlettered, does not understand. He tells the youth the tale is pretty, but nonsense, receiving this reply:

> You are wrong. Pretty nonsense? No, the tale has a beginning, middle and end, and so contents the hearer, leaving behind the seed of thought. And this is it, he added: all is otherwise, in life. For there the

> dragon Circumstance is seldom overcome, and never at the last, since he has the last word, which is death. So, too, with sighs and laments: who has not known these in the quest for love? And sorrows and hardships? In life, all is broken, or unfinished, or becoming: a man grows old and life is finished with him. But is he finished with life? Why, no, for whatever projects he had, none has been brought to fruition. Thus the poet's greatest song remains forever unsung, the mason's masterpiece of stone lies in the darkness of the doorless womb of his brain. And so with all who practice the sister arts, and with those, too, who strive to learn the arts of government, of war, of love. For these enterprises ten thousand years were not enough.
>
> But what was the seed left by your tale?
>
> The seed? Why, the great bird, the phœnix, who has neither father nor mother, but renews himself forever. We knock with the knocker of thought, the Phœnix opens. What is this? A bird? Why, no, but a symbol. Behind the great curved beak, the agate eyes, is concealed the mystery of memory, of what was, is, and is to be.
>
> . . . Did I say a thousand years? he asked. Why, a cycle of a thousand thousand years would not be enough for this great feast of life, of which Fate throws us this little crumb, a paltry brevity of years.

The crusader muses on the wisdom of the jongleur, who looked into "a realm within the heart, the mind, of man, vast as that which lies external to his being." The youth understands more than monk and prior, yet never "preached" nor postured like a spokesman for the Deity.

There are runes to be deciphered in these tales, even as in life. Only in the first is the Platonic teaching made clear:

> Theopompus said, smiling . . . We must try to enter into the world of the spirit here on earth. It is life that shackles the soul and is its impediment, for the body, with its incessant urgencies, is the soul's prison-house whose gate is unbarred at the hour of death. All great truths encyst a simple idea: thus, the problem of life on earth is to keep the soul pure; for the soul is the immortal part. . . . Surely, it must be that after death the unchanging bad go to eternal suffering, the bad to purgatory, to atone their sins, as the Orphics teach, in ten-fold suffering and thereafter to be reincarnated and reborn?
>
> But he derided in his mind the oft-proclaimed power of the priests to make easy this path through Hades, thinking: Wherever there exists a priesthood, there one finds fraud.

The young men reason together about Plato's teachings, that "we pass through many lives, and in each receive good or evil, according to divine justice," our knowledge in this life coming "from ancient memories, our souls moving up and down the scale of life by a process of metempsychosis or transmigration." "What we know," Theopompus instructs his fellows, "we know because our souls in a former existence knew before they were plunged from the pure light into the depths of material being, into the body of flesh and blood, and there lies remembering. . . ."

So, in these tales, George Godwin draws upon the inexhaustible waters of the "Lake of Memory." The four stories have themselves the pleasant invitation of a jongleur's lay, and might be read for a like enjoyment, yet also for the "seed of thought" that is in them.

COMMENTARY
THE POWER OF CULTURE

A RECENT press report from Panmunjom in Korea describes the brave action of an officer of the Indian army who walked into the midst of a mob of rioting Chinese prisoners of war and quieted them by saying, "What kind of Chinese are you? You have not invited either me or my men to have tea and cigarettes!"

We have been writing a lot in these pages lately about the role of *culture* in human society. The response of the enraged Chinese POW's to the Indian officer's action illustrates the power of cultural tradition. No amount of moralizing or "preaching" at these angry men could have produced the effect that was gained by a simple reference to the tradition of Chinese courtesy. The Indian, some may say, simply "exploited" the tradition for an expedient end, but even if this is so, there is still something quite wonderful about the fact that a simple reminder could cause the rioters to stop and think what they were doing.

An incident of this sort makes you reflect upon the millions and millions of Chinese people who, in their childhood, were taught to honor guests with courtesy and hospitality. This is the way, they came to understand, a Chinese human being behaves. It is a part of the dignity of a Chinese human being.

But suppose a similar tradition could be more broadly based, which would develop in the people of all nations a love and respect for others—a tradition which would be taught to all children, not as Chinese, or as European, or as American, but simply as *human beings!*

This, we think, is the way to world peace, and the only sure way.

The psychology of war and war-making is a deliberate attack on what already exists of the basic cultural attitude of man's respect for man. In order to prosecute a war, a nation must wear away all *universal* feelings of human sympathy, converting them into nationalist passions. Thus young American soldiers must be *taught* to pull the trigger on enemy troops; without special training, many will deliberately miss, or will not shoot at all, according to the reports of psychologists.

Perhaps we should consider that all war—even war for the high purpose of maintaining a "free world"—has a tendency to destroy the universal quality of man's respect for man, and to replace it with partisan emotions.

FRONTIERS

An Interesting Debate

AN interchange in the *Christian Century* (Sept. 16) between Reinhold Niebuhr and V. Ogden Vogt, a Unitarian critic of Mr. Niebuhr, is of interest for the reason that from the latter's rejoining observations we obtain the seasoned reason of a man who is probably the most sophisticated Christian thinker alive today. Perhaps we ought to add that Niebuhr shines particularly as a critic of his times and of the oversimplified utterances of others concerning these times.

Vogt takes Niebuhr to task for having written disparagingly of the scientific interpretation of the human situation. He argues on what appear to be familiar humanist grounds, although, after Niebuhr finishes his rebuttal, it seems that Vogt has badly missed the point. And Niebuhr, with rather efficient intellectual *jujitsu*, agrees with Vogt in the only areas where the Unitarian seems strong.

Briefly, Vogt urges that the "Secularist Witness" makes an important contribution to this orthodox Christian age. The secularist rejects the idea of a single, all-sufficient revelation. No limit can be set to the knowledge that may be acquired in the future. Further, the secularist will have none of theological dualism concerning the nature of man. Man is "whole and free." Vogt seems to take the view that the modern world's march to better things has been interrupted only by the malignant activity of a handful of evildoers whose success in bringing about wars and tyrannies has hidden the essential goodness of mankind. Thus: "If the contemporary events of cruel tyrannies are the demonic doings of a few men of ill will, contemporary events of resistance, rescue, resuscitation and cooperation are manly and godlike doings by many men of good will." Much more pertinently, we think, Vogt adds:

> The most devastating doings of our times, moreover, have occurred, not in the lands touched by the liberal spirit of modern religion and modern democracy, but rather in those where an authoritarian church has fostered an autocratic state. It is a curious perversion of the truth to lay these devastations to the failures of science when they are more truly the failures of dogmatic religion. Those nations where a true liberalism prevails, or nearly prevails, have today a fair chance to sustain their progress toward an economy of justice and plenty for all.

Vogt's closing paragraphs are equally pertinent:

> This age in America might more truly be called Christian than secular. Popular religion was never so high in prestige. Journalism vies with politics to court the church and avoid offending it. But also, our churches were never more deeply set in mediocrity, conformity and resistance to the prophetic voice. The secular world cannot possibly come to terms of coherence with a popular religion which still clings to so many discredited myths and miracles and irrelevant beliefs. It is not the scientific but the popular Christian view of the world that is discredited by contemporary events.
>
> Were religion to become less dogmatic and more religious, it would accept the best treasures of the secular witness to be compounded with the insights of valid religious experience in the fashioning of such a noble spiritual order as the world has never seen.

The force of Mr. Niebuhr's response to these strictures is probably due in part to the fact that he is under no obligation to defend any "belief" or "doctrine" which might be termed "orthodox." He says:

> I find the efforts of both secularists and Christians to place responsibility for modern demonries completely on the other side both dishonest and boring. I did not charge science with responsibility for totalitarianism; I charged a secular age with inability to anticipate or comprehend the real meaning of these modern catastrophes. The social phenomena of which we speak are endlessly complex.
>
> One tyranny arises in an essentially secular and enlightened culture; is itself explicitly religious in a pagan sense; and is resisted heroically by people informed by what Mr. Vogt calls a "dogmatic" religion. The other tyranny arises in a backward and traditionally religious nation; it is explicitly anti-religious but implicitly religious in the sense that it is thoroughly committed to a basic proposition which

> gives its whole enterprise meaning in the eyes of the faithful. This particular tyranny incidentally had, until very recently, devotees among the intellectuals of the whole Western world, including some parsons in Mr. Vogt's own church. Should we count noses in order to prove our respective superior righteousness?

These points are fairly made, we think. While we are bound to agree with Mr. Vogt that narrow, dogmatic religion contributes to the psychology of reaction, and that the mood of revelatory religion is a totalitarian mood, as evidenced whenever religious dogmatists come to power—witness South Africa today—we cannot share the feeling that progressive, secular science in its "popular" form is so very superior. Niebuhr scores the "party spirit" in secularism with what seems just and effective comment:

> Mr. Vogt may not be an explicit naturalist, but his religious dogma has two partly inconsistent foundations which characterize all modern naturalism. The one is the belief that history is an extension of the natural process so that the evolutionary process guarantees historical progress. The other is that man is at least a part of nature to the degree that he can be manipulated as science manipulates natural forces.
>
> The group of natural scientists who do the manipulating stand, in some mysterious way, outside of the process, or they would not have the vantage point from which to manipulate. The so-called "methods of science" perform the divine function which Aristotle attributes to *nous*. My thesis was that both types rob man of his dignity in the sense that they obscure the freedom of the self, which ultimately transcends nature too much to be manipulated. They also obscure the finiteness of the scientist who pretends to do the manipulating, and who is more involved in the historical process than he will admit. This lack of modesty is characteristic of all élite, whether priestly or scientific.
>
> This aspect of modern theory establishes at least a theoretic affinity between modern scientific humanism and communism. The communists however are more dangerous because they have actually acquired a monopoly of power to put their pretensions into effect.

We don't know enough about Mr. Vogt's views to be able to tell whether this passage is just to him or not, but the reasoning, from premises assumed, seems entirely sound. Its soundness, however, is unlikely to prevent at least some scientific humanists from becoming furious at Mr. Niebuhr for reaching the conclusion that he does, and this is explainable by the fact that the reasoning is metaphysical in character—a process of argument which has little popularity and less understanding among those toward whom the criticism is directed.

Niebuhr continues, presenting his theory of "sin":

> There is therefore no arbitrariness in accusing some types of modern thought of robbing man of his dignity on which they endlessly discourse. To judge from some of the other letters in the Century responding to my article, there are quite a number of Christian parsons who do not understand that the Christian doctrine of man's sinfulness is not a threat to his "dignity." It merely understands that his dignity is in his freedom. This freedom makes it possible for him to be both a creator and a destroyer in history. He usually becomes a destroyer when he forgets that he is a creature, as well as creator, in this mysterious realm of history. It may be "of one piece" with nature; but it has some remarkable possibilities of good and evil, of which nature knows nothing.

Niebuhr calls this the "Christian" doctrine of man's sinfulness; if so, it is a rather novel one, since it joins in man the capacities of both creator and destroyer, after the fashion of ancient oriental faiths which existed long before Christianity was heard of on earth. What we know of Christian orthodoxy—which is not a very great deal—has always left us with the impression that man is a sinner in that he is prone to error, weak, and in great need of divine grace to correct his ways, while the role of *creator* belongs primarily and emphatically to God. Perhaps further explanation from Mr. Niebuhr would blight the fresh breeze of antique pagan thought we find in this paragraph, but he didn't blight it here, and we should like to see some thoughtful humanist, as little given to doctrinaire formulas as Mr. Niebuhr, carry the discussion further.