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THE TYRANNY OF EQUALITY

QUALITY versus equality: Which principle shall rule our destiny? The current trend toward equalitarian values is out of harmony with the great tradition of Western thought, is in fact subversive of it, and cannot meet the deeper needs of man.

Although Western civilization cannot be characterized in a phrase, perhaps *individual fulfillment* is its central theme, upon which each successive era has developed variations. From the Classical world to the present one may trace the sometimes frayed but unbroken thread of a tradition which holds that the high destiny of man is bound up with his quest for excellence, in his character and in his work. Though as often in the breach as in the observance, still *it is the exceptional man whom our tradition honors.* Yet today this noble tradition is threatened as never before. The enemy? *Mass man.* By sheer force of numbers the exceptional man is being overwhelmed and forced to the ground, a dagger at his throat. Under the modern avalanche of equalitarian propaganda and institutions we are swiftly losing sight of the vision which has been the glory and the driving force of Western civilization: the vision of those heroes of the human spirit who individually, through adversity and suffering, have won through to major achievements for mankind and kept alive the tradition of greatness for their fellows to respond to, each in his own measure. We have thus far failed to adapt this basically hierarchical, aristocratic conception of man to the changing conditions of life in the twentieth century.

Virtually all the great achievements of the past flowered in societies not equalitarian but aristocratic, with gradations of excellence built into their very structure, each age evolving its own prototype.

In the ancient world Jesus of Nazareth and Socrates became exemplars of the seeker for excellence, so towering in stature that they remain to be equalled. The parables of Jesus, especially those about masters and servants, typically not only reflect the hierarchical social structure of his day but compare it closely with the nature of the spiritual world.

Classical Greece, with its incomparable cultural achievements, cannot begin to be grasped without a feeling for its love of perfection and its willingness to sacrifice the lower to the higher. "From the hour of their birth," declared Aristotle, "some are marked out for subjection and some for command." Many are shocked today by the ancient Greek practice of "exposing" defective infants. Well, today we cherish our defectives ("No less precious," as the poster slogan has it), while the Greeks cherished their best. To each his own. Yet where is our Plato and our Parthenon? If the extraordinary can flourish only at the expense of the ordinary, still the gain may be worth the price. In a deeper sense, however, the efforts of those on all levels contribute to the achievements of the great.

During medieval times, despite the general restriction on new thought imposed by the Church-dominated society, devoted monastics maintained the tradition of excellence. Indeed, on all social levels no question was so important as the salvation of one's immortal soul.

Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the Renaissance burst upon the medieval world with all the force of a surging river no longer to be contained by its banks and dams, a new dignity of man was proclaimed, and with it expanding earthly horizons for him. The Renaissance Man, universal in his talents and

confident in his outlook, symbolizes the ideal for his period.

The seventeenth century saw the triumph of the Puritan spirit, which stressed the sanctity of work and moral striving and has so largely shaped the American character. The Miltonic universe was of course hierarchical, order being heaven's first law.

In the eighteenth century one could look up to the rational gentleman of the Enlightenment with all his high-principled optimism.

Yet where, today, is our prototype of the seeker for excellence—one to whom all can look up, and to whom men instinctively turn for the incarnation of their moral ideals? *He does not exist.* To be sure, our Post-Heroic Age is developing values and aspirations consistent with itself; the point is that these swerve so sharply from those of the mainstream of Western values that they threaten to engulf us in a tidal wave of unprincipled mediocrity. In weird caricature of the traditional quest for individual fulfillment, we now see everywhere a frantic pursuit of creature comforts and attempts to gratify superficial whims and artificially stimulated desires—a desperate grasping at the shadows of identity.

We cannot trace to their probable sources in the upheavals of the Renaissance, Reformation, and scientific revolution the various tributes which have fed the mighty river of equalitarianism. Somewhat as the scientific revolution seemed to many to have shattered the concept of a moral universe, when logically of course it did not and could not do any such thing, so today does the equalitarian revolution seem to have vanquished aristocratic principles, although in reality they are as valid as ever.

One cause of our plight is surely triumphant technology, which grinds out goods almost faster than they can be used, thus rapidly transforming us from a nation of inner-directed producers to a nation of other-directed consumers, as David Riesman describes this character change in *The Lonely Crowd.* The inner-directed personality, oriented to measureable goals of achievement and objective criteria, gives way to the other-directed personality, dependent upon the approval of others and occupied with the pleasures of consumption.

A second source of the problem lies in collectivism, the ever-increasing trend toward a huge governmental apparatus for controlling the mushrooming traffic of human beings, products and services. Other factors include the population upsurge, the growing interdependence fostered by advancing transportation and communications, and the wide appeal of equalitarian ideas themselves.

Our predicament is a logical though unforeseen development of broadly historical forces at work—the impact of new institutions upon human nature—though it is no less critical for all that. Diabolical conspirators are hard to find. The rudderless, wayward drift of modern life seems the chief villain.

Man's passage through time resembles a journey on a great river. If a man cannot choose which stretch he must travel, still he is not helpless. As always, most will drift with the current, risking the rocks and rapids, the whirlpools and falls; while some few feel compelled to chart their course and navigate as best they may, sometimes even heading their craft upstream.

It is not enough to plead the "inevitability" of the equalitarian society. Except for those with lingering illusions of Progress, new social forms must earn their vote of confidence from thinking men solely on their own merits. Can the equalitarian society entertain the highest aspirations of man or is it by nature limited to meeting his grosser needs?

Nor will it do to claim that those advocating the equalitarian society are men of integrity and high ideals which allow for individual freedom in the world they call for. Eloquent pleaders are not

necessarily fitted to rule, and often must turn the reins over to those who have mastered the art of power relationships. Moreover, once launched, movements and institutions begin a life of their own, quite beyond the control of those nominally in charge. The arms race between the United States and Russia is an example. Neither side "wants" war, neither can benefit from it, yet these facts do not slow the pace toward mutual annihilation. The ugly truth is, especially to those who profess faith in reason, that irrational forces play so large a role in human history as to suggest what has- been called a "secular doctrine of Original Sin."

Now to define the aristocratic view, that we may contrast the equalitarian view with it. Aristocracy means "rule by the best." The essential aristocratic position builds upon a frank recognition that men are of very differing native capacities. It allows for and encourages differentiation in the level of their achievements, believing that the whole tone of life in an organic society is elevated by high individual achievement on the part of its most favored members, in which lesser men can feel they share and by which they may be inspired. Great men look to the stars; lesser men may glimpse the stars through the example of the great. This view sees the history of human achievement as the history of character—of fortunate heredity whose promise is fulfilled by initiative and self-discipline, and only to a lesser extent by environment. The aristocratic spirit holds individual merit supreme. And only merit can honor merit.

The world of nature thrives on diversity and differentiation. Even among specimens of the same plant the seed differs, with varying native degrees of strength and beauty, and in the desirability of fruit borne. It would be curious indeed to find nature's most complex, highly developed organism, the human being, the sole exception to this rule.

Even Riesman, no aristocrat, exploring the origins of the mature individual who transcends the limitations of his culture, concludes: "When someone fails to become autonomous, we can very often see what blockages have stood in his way, but when someone succeeds in the same overt setting in which others have failed, I myself have no ready explanation of this, and am sometimes tempted to fall back on constitutional or genetic factors—what people of an earlier era called the divine spark."

"But does not our Declaration of Independence state 'All men are created equal'?" one may object. There is an ambiguity in this phrase. That the framers of the Declaration did not themselves take it literally seems clear from the nature of the society they later fashioned, which proved more republic than democracy. And consider Jefferson's efforts to develop an aristocracy of the intellect. Rather than proclaiming an identical potential for everyone, it is more likely that, in the eighteenth century, when social class differences loomed so large, the phrase "All men are created equal" carried a challenge to inherited social privilege. Instead of some persons beginning the race of life with a head start, owing to an accident of birth, it was proposed to abolish legally sanctioned classes. But as some runners are natively swifter than others, this is not to say that the race must end in a dead heat. Too often, "All men are created equal" is used as a club by which the less able hope to seize that which they cannot attain by merit. But if the expression may serve as a constant reminder that no man may be exploited or written off, and that every man carries at least the potential of individuality which we are bound to honor, then it is redeemed.

Aristocrats face responsibilities which do not trouble equalitarians. To acknowledge levels of being is also to acknowledge the need to distinguish among them with all possible objectivity. Temptations to egotism and bigotry may be present. It is partly a question of cultivating a certain faculty. The same eye with which we see our inferiors also shows us our

superiors, and the mature mind will recognize the latter as surely and as quickly as the former. Have we not all, at one time or another, in the presence of an extraordinary person, felt like Gulliver in the land of the Houyhnhnms? The fact that both political and social aristocracy, at least as recently practiced, have proved inadequate forms for twentieth-century life has unfortunately led us to discard along with their externals the profoundly true and enduring values which they also represented.

Equalitarian doctrine proceeds upon the assumption that men are of approximately equal capacity, or would be so given equally favorable environment. It focuses upon the physical and cultural wants of the common man, the society offering personal security and a collective identity in exchange for his allegiance.

Among equalitarians there is commonly a tendency to depreciate tradition and the past. *Noblesse oblige* has short shrift. In this parochial view history is seen as dominated by a kind of conspiracy of the wealthy and privileged to allow them to live in ease and luxury by hoodwinking and exploiting those good but helpless persons beneath them. Thus *the secret virtue of the lowly*, who are now redeemed in a society designed to serve the many instead of the few. People's heads are now filled with notions about how fine they are because at last they are *equal*. To whom? Why, to each other, of course! A man may be *conditioned* to accept the illusion of equality, but true individuality he must win

Even equalitarian leaders are not men in the vanguard of humanity, but only those a clever step or two ahead of the crowd. As in the Orwell fable, they are "more equal than others." The crowd follows leaders who must follow—the crowd. A dachshund wrapped around the world, facing a prospect which leaves something to be desired.

At its best equalitarian doctrine attempts "leveling up to the highest rather than down to the lowest." But do the deeper levels of human aspiration lie so close to the manipulator's fingertips? The good intentions of the equalitarian cannot save him, for his assumptions have condemned him to be *the enemy of the best.*

One object of the campaign for equality is by erasing distinctions to create the uniform, predictable psychology among the populace required by the nature of the collectivist state. Interchangeable persons are as advantageous to its social machine as interchangeable parts are to the mechanical engine. And so is achieved the social efficiency of a beehive or anthill; and, one suspects, a like possibility for genuine growth—barring, of course, the establishment of a Ministry of Wisdom.

Bulging with confident passengers and flying such banners as "the Century of the Common Man," "The Revolution of Rising Expectations," and "the Greatest Good for the Greatest Number," the excursion train leaves for the Welfare State and points left. But it is the fate of the equalitarian to fall victim of his own propaganda. Unwilling to recognize orders of being, unable to make meaningful value judgments, he must reckon not by true norms but by mere averages. Quality flees, yet is not consciously missed.

The equalitarian view permeates our every institution, from politics and religion to economics and the social structure. For example, in the early years of the republic, populated by only a few millions, voters for president could choose from among giant statesmen like Jefferson and Adams. Today with a population of 190 millions, few but pygmies ever get nominated. Men of stature seldom even enter politics, for only the crowd-pleasers can succeed.

Even our taste in popular heroes is affected. Look at two Americans who have won wide acclaim for comparable feats: Charles A. Lindbergh, for his nonstop transatlantic crossing in 1997, and John Glenn, for his orbital flight in 1962. Lindbergh personally took the initiative in planning his flight, even designing his plane. Virtually every decision pertaining to the success

of his attempt rested upon him alone. In competition with organizations and teams, he as a resourceful individual won out. After his success he came to shun publicity in favor of larger concerns. This is a man of dimension, of class—an authentic hero.

In contrast, John Glenn in his space capsule was only one member of a huge team running a government project, the apex of a pyramid. During his flight he kept in touch with others on the ground for expert advice. He seems to enjoy his popularity and doubtless was selected for the favorable image he would project as well as for his technical qualifications. Wholesome, pleasant, well-adjusted, *he is like everyone else, only more so*—a marginal distinction if ever there was one! He is a new mode1 for American youth, yet one whose heroic stature would surely be recognizable to no age but our own.

Even without artificial obstacles it is difficult for exceptional men to mature; but whereas in former times gradations of quality were inherent in the very fabric of society, this is no longer true. We have regressed from a tradition of perceiving qualitative differences to an alien doctrine which seeks to blur these differences, so that the very word "discrimination" has caught the pox. Just as the equalitarian atmosphere stifles great men, so proportionately it stifles the greatness in lesser men. For what is greatness but the good that is in all men grown to fruition in a few?

Heroes of the human spirit, like giant redwoods, stand astride the ages, reaching for the very heavens, awing us with their majesty. "Cut them down!" is the cry, "that instead we may raise—*grass."*

Today the emerging pattern of life finds meaningful personal distinction irrelevant and superfluous; and tomorrow, perhaps, it will become embarrassing, even intolerable. When the equalitarian state solidifies, becoming ever more hostile to the threat of individuality, we shall surely see grow an underground, a resistance, of men determined to rise from their knees to their feet and walk upright, as they were meant to do.

The spirit and the glory of man are not to be denied. "For it is according to eternal fitness that the precipitated Titan should still seek to regain his paternal birthright even by fierce escalade. Wherefore whoso storms the sky gives best proof he came from thither! But whatso crawls contented in the moat beside that crystal fort, shows it was born within that slime and there forever will abide." (Herman Melville, *Pierre.)*

Clearly, if the great Western tradition of individual excellence is to resume, we shall have to recover our lost values and learn to reconcile them with modern life. Or is modern life itself their mortal enemy? Let whoever treasures his spiritual heritage and feels a responsibility to sustain and extend it, confront these questions and respond with the imperatives inherent in his being. It is uncertain what sacrosanct ideas might have to be re-examined under the searching light of aristocratic principles. Yet if these principles are valid, for us to fail to press on for fear of challenging cherished notions would be like a carpenter's pleading for dull chisels, lest he cut himself while working with sharp ones.

Whom shall we honor, the common man or the uncommon man? We cannot serve two masters. A low estimate of man prompts us to exalt the mediocre; but a high estimate of man takes the best for its standard. The most hopeless captivity is to be a prisoner of low aspirations.

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REVIEW
THE VERSATILE DWIGHT MACDONALD

AGAINST THE AMERICAN GRAIN, by Dwight Macdonald (Random House, $6.50), is a collection of essays and reviews in both a light and a philosophic vein—often in bitingly sharp criticism, though sometimes in praise.

MANAS has more than once referred to the more ambitious portion of this book, first published as a series in *Encounter* and titled, as now in the book, "Masscult and Midcult." Here, the reader will find, is a man who provokes, and provokes constructively—possibly because he doesn't seem to care whether or not he is "constructive" in the conventional sense of the word. Yet with all that is caustic in his writing, Mr. Macdonald is a man of compassion in his own style. (See "James Agee—Some Memories and Letters," *Encounter*, December, 1962.)

The preface to *Against the American Grain* alone contains enough material for a MANAS review. The passages most interesting to us are illustrative of Macdonald's often well-concealed "idealism"—well-concealed, because idealism for Macdonald (see his essays, "The Responsibility of Peoples" and "The Root is Man") always sets out from an uncompromising assessment of a stark situation. Whether we call this writer a dilettante or an aristocrat (his critics are not apt to grant a difference), he makes no bones about his view that Ortega's "masses" *cannot* be integrated with "high culture":

> Up to about 1750, art and thought were pretty much the exclusive province of an educated minority. Now that the masses—that is, everybody—are getting into the act and making the scene, the problem of vulgarization has become acute.
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> Let it be admitted at once, as Dr. Edward Shils and other Panglosses of the sociological approach keep insisting, that mediocrity has always been the norm even in the greatest periods. This fact of life is obscured by another: when we look at the past, we see only the best works because they alone have survived. But the rise of masscult has introduced several new and confusing factors.
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> There is today, if anything, a too ready acceptance of the avant-garde by a public, as respectful as it is undiscriminating, that has learned perhaps too much from the sad experiences of the past. If serious and ambitious works of quality are now less likely to be overlooked, serious and ambitious works of no quality are more likely to be praised.

But there is some unexpected optimism in the last paragraph of the preface:

> To conclude on a more cheerful note: there seems to be an underground, far more widespread than one might think from observing only what appears in print (mostly the establishment view), which responds favorably to subversive questioning of the pretenders and the *clercs*. When in *Commentary*, I reviewed the reviewers of *By Love Possessed, I* received an extraordinary mail. So, too, with my reviews, in the *New Yorker*, of the new Bible, the new dictionary and the Great Books set. As any editor knows, people usually write in when they disagree, but here the opposite was the case; almost no letters came in defending the objects of my criticism. Indeed, and here is perhaps a gloomy note, the objects themselves, except for Mr. James Gould Cozzens who did write a jocularly abusive letter, have not felt it necessary to reply. Either they found my points unanswerable, which is unlikely, or they felt in a strong enough position to ignore criticism. And it is, unhappily, a fact that the new Bibles both here and in England have been best sellers, that the new dictionary has so far survived and that the Great Books are at this writing, ten years after publication, still being successfully peddled from door to door by a locust-horde of salesmen.

One thing about Dwight Macdonald that continues to fascinate this reviewer is his amazing versatility—or is it virtuosity?—with words, ideas, and frames of reference. But this is the very quality in the man which annoys some of his critics. A clear example of the latter complaint concerning both Macdonald and *Against the American Grain is* supplied by James Gatsby in *Contact* for April. Here is a case in which it is hard to tell (unless one reads the rest of Mr. Gatsby's critique) whether Macdonald is being

brushed off (which he is) or being credited with somewhat phenomenal talents. Gatsby writes:

> Macdonald, when pressed, describes himself as an "artist," or, "to be more modest," a "craftsman." And yet, if he is an artist; what works of art has he created? Is he an editor? He has done a bit of editing. A biographer? He wrote a muckraking biography of Henry Wallace in 1948, and he has done profiles of such people as Alfred Barr and Dorothy Day for *The New Yorker*. A literary critic? Macdonald has dabbled in criticism. A film reviewer? Macdonald reviewed films for *Partisan Review* in the thirties and forties, and now does a regular column for *Esquire*. A theoretician? He has published one theoretical work, *The Root is Man*, and has written a number of theory-ridden missives to the editors of various publications, and at lengths of up to thirty thousand words. (Most of these communications, fortunately enough, did not see print.) Or is he an anthologist? Because he has published an anthology, too. But perhaps it is best to get off this track; a better way of approaching Dwight Macdonald would be to ask: what has he not done?
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> Most of us, I imagine, think of him as a wit. And yet, he is not a humorist, even though a single one of his epigrams (such as the memorable one that "if italics were horses, intellectual beggars might ride") is worth a whole shelf of Thurber. I am sure that Dwight Macdonald will be mentioned in any intellectual history of our times, but I am bothered as to just *what* he will be mentioned as. . . .

The reader will note in the foregoing a literary device which is reminiscent of Macdonald; he also uses frequent parentheses to take care of the many things that can come to mind in the midst of a sentence. MANAS uses them, too, for about the same reasons (but occasionally we long for a brilliance and a technique comparable to Macdonald's to go along with these parentheses). It sometimes seems that Macdonald's unusual punctuation is a minor means of breaking out of usual molds of thought—something entirely necessary if one is ever to learn the difference between "masscult" and true culture or genuine philosophy.

Macdonald's concluding essay is appropriately placed in the *American Grain*, and its closing paragraphs go far to explain his passion for the sort of critical writing he does so well:

> A hunter looks at a wood in one way, an artist in another. The latter's eye takes in every twig, branch, trunk, shadow, color, highlight, etc. The former's eye also records all this data, but his mind rejects everything except the particular Fact (brown fur, speckled feathers) it is looking for. The hunter knows what he will see (or rather, what he hopes he will see) before he looks. Since the artist's aim is to render the wood in itself and as a whole (he may do it by three lines, as in a Chinese landscape, or by a Dutch proliferation of detail) his problem is how to be conscious of everything. The hunter's problem is just the reverse: to be conscious of only what he has decided, in advance, to see. The same distinction could be made between the way a Wordsworth looks at a field and the way a farmer looks at it.
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> We Americans are hunters rather than artists, a practical race, narrow in our perceptions, men of action rather than of thought or feeling. Our chief contribution to philosophy is pragmatism *(pragma* is Greek for *factum);* technique rather than theory distinguishes our science; our homes, our cities, our landscapes are designed for profit or practicality but not generally for beauty; we think it odd that a man should devote his life to writing poems but natural that he should devote it to inducing children to breakfast on Crunchies instead of Krispies; our scholars are strong on research, weak on interpreting the masses of data they collect; we say "That's just a fact" and we mean not "That's merely a fact" but rather "Because that is a fact, there is nothing more to be said."
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> This tropism toward the Fact deforms our thinking and impoverishes our humanity. "Theory" (Greek *theoria*) is literally a "looking at" and thence "contemplation, reflection speculation." Children are told: "You may look but you mustn't touch," that is, "You mustn't *change* what you look at." This would be good discipline for Americans, just to look at things once in a while without touching them, using them, converting them into means to achieve power, profit, or some other practical end. The artist's vision, not the hunter's.

COMMENTARY
IN BEHALF OF EXCELLENCE

THE reader of Richard Groff's article ("The Tyranny of Equality") who encounters here for the first time a vigorous criticism of equalitarian dogma is likely to feel both puzzlement and indignation. It is not that Mr. Groff says anything which seems exactly *wrong,* but that he sounds indifferent to a humanitarian conception on which Western civilization has prided itself for at least a hundred years.

What this writer is really saying, however, is that political ideals do not exhaust the possibilities of human good, and when the slogans and popular education of a civilization are allowed to rest upon political principles alone, the people who live under this influence suffer a deterioration in qualities which political principles ignore. Mr. Groff sets out to expose a central delusion of democratic society—the supposition that a constitution founded upon equal justice to all people, regardless of their origins and personal traits, at the same time has the miraculous effect of endowing everyone with a quite adequate supply of intellectual abilities and moral attitudes.

While Mr. Groff starts out by speaking of the *"current* trend toward equalitarian values," the insights on which his criticism is based are an essential part of the Humanist tradition. Irving Babbitt *(Rousseau and Romanticism,* Meridian paperback) long ago saw the threat to standards of individual human excellence in political equalitarian doctrines, and Ortega y Gasset gave this criticism a classical form in his *Revolt of the Masses* (Norton, 1932). Another sort of attention to the problems of the mass society was provided by Lyman Bryson in *The Next America* (Harper, 1952), and Dwight Macdonald's "Masscult and Midcult" (see Review) deals with similar cultural anomalies. These books give background and focus to the issues discussed by Mr. Groff.

There is an element of the "shock of recognition" in Ortega's terse identifications of the mass man. He says in *Revolt of the Masses:*

> The characteristic of the hour is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them wherever it will. As they say in the United States: "to be different is to be indecent." The mass crushes beneath everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select. Anybody who is not like everybody, who does not think like everybody, runs the risk of being eliminated. . . .
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> . . . the man we are now analyzing accustoms himself not to appeal from his own to any authority outside him. . . . true to his character, {he} feels himself lord of his own existence. . . . we distinguished the excellent man from the common man by saying that the former is the one who makes great demands on himself, and the latter the one who makes no demands on himself, but contents himself with what he is, and is delighted with himself. . . .
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> The individual finds himself already with a stock of ideas. He decides to content himself with them and to consider himself intellectually complete. As he feels the lack of nothing outside himself, he settles down definitely amid his intellectual furniture. . . . The "ideas" of the average man are not genuine ideas, nor is their possession culture. . . . It is no use speaking of ideas when there is no acceptance of a higher authority to regulate them, a series of standards to which it is possible to appeal in a discussion. These standards are the principles on which culture rests. I am not concerned with the form they take. What I affirm is that there is no culture where there are no standards to which our fellow-men can have recourse. There is no culture where there are no principles of legality to which to appeal. There is no culture where there is no acceptance of certain final intellectual positions to which a dispute may be referred. If anyone in a discussion with us is not concerned with adjusting himself to truth, if he has no wish to find the truth, he is intellectually a barbarian. That, in fact, is the position of the mass-man when he speaks, lectures, or writes. . . . Barbarism is the absence of standards to which appeal can be made. . . .
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> The contemporary State is the easiest seen and best-known product of civilization. And it is an interesting revelation when one takes note of the attitude that mass-man adopts before it. He sees it,

> admires it, knows that *there it is*, safeguarding his existence. . . . the mass-man sees in the State an anonymous power, and feeling himself, like it, anonymous, he believes that the State is something of his own. Suppose that in the public life of a country some difficulty, conflict, or problem presents itself, the mass-man will tend to demand that the State intervene immediately and undertake a solution directly with its immense and unassailable resources.
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> This is the gravest danger that today threatens civilization: State intervention, the absorption of all spontaneous social effort by the State, that is to say, of spontaneous historical action, which in the long run sustains, nourishes, and impels human destinies.

The great problem of the age is the restoration of full human function to the individual. Once this is accomplished, we shall find our political problems redefined and at last made manageable by the increasing assumption of responsibility by individuals.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

[In search of an inviting yet clearly defined approach to the relation of education to religion, we come to one basic idea— that the human mind, whether of a child or an adult, can learn nothing new, discover nothing worth knowing, if the experience of religion is sectarian. One may *believe*, of course, but that is an entirely different matter.

To explore man's inner need for a feeling of transcendence, and of the permanence of the self or soul, does not, however require a theological point of departure. One can turn to the scriptures that have moved countless people according to rote and find that they also move him, but through his spontaneous reaction.

"Authority" in respect to the great scriptures of the world is likely to have a debilitating effect upon the creative side of the individual mind. A great scripture, like a great work of art, should be approached anew each day, as if it were fresh to us and we to it. For *we*, it is to be hoped, have ourselves changed meanwhile and grown in perspective, even if only a little. From this point of view, then, the attempt to remember what we have heard or read in interpretation of a passage, a chapter, or an entire scripture, is not really very important, unless we use the recollection simply as a point of further departure.

Great scriptures are in one sense like the music of the poetry which has reached into the hearts of so many that it has blended into the common human heritage. If these "scriptures are approached without notice of any sectarian position, they may be found to say much of both psychology and philosophy, as well as of religion. This sort of "comparative religion" can be natural to all men, and, through parents, to all children.]

THE great scriptures are all imbued with a special kind of magic. Reading *The Dhammapada*, we find ourselves increasingly engaged in weaving our own web of psychological and ethical philosophy, as correlations between the Buddha's various sayings begin to establish themselves. From *The Bhagavad-Gita*, one comes to see something of what is meant by the term "mystery religion"; many of the metaphors and symbols employed may seem confusing at first glance, but later yield a germinal idea or perception. So, as in the case of any comparatively "pure" scripture, we encounter something which comes closer to poetry than doctrine, which may be mantramic, but is not didactic.

The mystical philosophy of *The Bhagavad-Gita* is set against the backdrop of a realistic epic scene—the battlefield. Why should the *Gita* provide a warlike frame for discourses on spiritual philosophy? Perhaps because there is no genuine "spirituality" unless there has been a struggle in and through the great frictions of earthly experience. Truly, all men must fight wars of some kind, and is not such strife, then, a universal symbol? But the *Gita* is not concerned primarily with the "facts" of the conflict between the Kurus and the Pandus. It deals, rather, with the question of why the war should be fought—and, most important of all, what state of mind should be gained or sought by the warrior. The teacher, Krishna, finds many ways of informing his disciple, Arjuna, that unless a man has his immediate impulses under control—unless he disciplines his entire psychic nature—he will not be effective in mortal struggle. Paradoxically, *before* he engages the field, he should be prepared to make "victory and defeat, gain and loss, the same," in terms of his emotional reactions.

Like most humans beset by extreme difficulty, Arjuna is distraught. But Krishna, though "tenderly smiling," does not appear to feel sorry for the young prince. Instead, he emphasizes what a sorry figure a warrior cuts when he sits disconsolate on the battlefield with his head in his hands. Possibly "sympathy" is of secondary importance to Krishna.

If we remember always to think of the personage of Krishna as a symbol for the constantly-aspiring center of life within each man, it is not difficult to understand the relationship between Krishna and "sympathy," for if the struggle of the creative spirit is the way to lasting happiness in human experience, then the greatest

help that can be given any man is to encourage him to persist in his efforts. What ordinarily passes for sympathy often flows from the fallacious belief that life is at times "too hard" to bear. But how is one to attain such equanimity—the calm that Krishna requires of Arjuna as a prerequisite to regaining his kingdom? First of all, the fear of death must be laid to rest by a transcendental philosophy. The following passages from the *Gita* are the view of "eternal evolution" which Krishna discloses early in the dialogue:

> Thou grievest for those that may not be lamented. Those who are wise in spiritual things grieve neither for the dead nor for the living. I myself never was not, nor thou, nor all the princes of the earth; nor shall we ever hereafter cease to be. As the lord of this mortal frame experienceth therein infancy, youth, and old age, so in future incarnations will it meet the same. One who is confirmed in this belief is not disturbed by anything that may come to pass.
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> These finite bodies, which envelope the souls inhabiting them, are said to belong to the eternal, the indestructible, unprovable Spirit, who is in the body. The man who believeth that it is this Spirit which killeth, and he who thinketh that it may be destroyed, are both alike deceived; for it neither killeth nor is it killed. It is not a thing of which a man may say, "It hath been, it is about to be, or is to be hereafter"; for it is without birth and meeteth not death; it is ancient, constant, and eternal, and is not slain when this its mortal frame is destroyed. How can the man who believeth that it is incorruptible eternal, inexhaustible, and without birth, think that it can either kill or cause to be killed.
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> As a man throweth away old garments and putteth on new, even so the dweller in the body, having quitted its old mortal frames, entereth into others which are new. Death is certain to all things which are born, and rebirth to all mortals; wherefore it doth not behoove thee to grieve about the inevitable.
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> The man whose devotion has been broken off by death is then born again on earth in a pure and fortunate family; or even in a family of those who are spiritually illuminated. But such a rebirth into this life as this last is more difficult to obtain. Being thus born again he comes in contact with the knowledge which belonged to him in his former body, and from that time he struggles more diligently towards perfection, O son of Kuru. For even unwittingly, by reason of that past practice, he is led and works on.

It is customary to call the Gita a "devotional" book. Since Arjuna is a warrior, and the place of the dialogue is a battle chariot, it becomes clear that the word "devotional" has little to do with conventional piety; the latter quality belongs to a more monastic setting. Although the whole of the discourse gives a larger meaning to "devotion," Krishna provides a simple definition. He tells Arjuna to "seek an asylum in this *mental* devotion *which is knowledge."* Thus it is the light of the fire of mind which makes possible true singleness of purpose and steadfastness of heart. The "devotion" which flows from the emotions of the personality can never reach to more than the conventional virtues, and these, we are informed, must later be transcended by the disciple. Each virtue may even become an opaque chrysalis for the soul, whereas the soul's need is for that state of mind which refuses self-satisfaction. *Mental* devotion can only be assured when the man has determined never to cease using his creative faculties. Thus Krishna says: "When thy heart shall have worked through the snares of delusion, then thou wilt attain to high indifference as to those doctrines which are already taught or which are yet to be taught. When thy mind once liberated from the Vedas shall be fixed immovably in contemplation, then shalt thou attain to devotion."

So, in the "mystery language" of the *Gita,* the disciple must attain to both indifference to death and indifference to doctrine to be the better able to understand and improve life, and to understand and improve doctrine.

FRONTIERS

Problems of Peace-Making

BY moral necessity, if not by intellectual definition, the Peace Movement needs no façade of superficial "unity," no united front concerning the means to world peace. At the level of primary concern—the concern to put an end to war—workers for peace are apolitical. Their motives arise from the primitive longing for a life without organized killing, for a society which cannot be galvanized into massively destructive action by the sharp spurs of ideological passion.

But since Western ideas of the Good Society are very nearly all embodied in political theories, and since it is widely believed that some form of political action is required to improve existing forms of society, the human longing to be "practical" draws pacifist writers into the arena of political discussion, while the desire to be "effective" leads to peace activities which bear a resemblance to "revolutionary action" of the past.

In recent years, the Peace Movement has lost its clear definition and its comparative "purity," due mainly to the emergence of a new category of worker for peace—the "nuclear" pacifist. The nuclear pacifists have brought to the peace movement a curious mixture of qualities. On the one hand are the manifestly distinguished intellectual talents of technical experts to whom the prospect of nuclear war seems incredibly stupid as well as manifestly suicidal. The calibre of the arguments of the nuclear pacifists against war and against some phases of modern preparation for war may perhaps be typified by the discussions which appear in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.* Then,. on the other hand, there is the uncomplicated intuitive-emotional stance of the Women's International Strike for Peace (WISP)—"which almost overnight enlisted the support of some 50,000 women (and some estimates put the figure even higher), many of whom are now active in holding demonstrations and meetings throughout the country."

It is a question, actually, whether the Peace Movement can assimilate these dominating influences and still retain definable identity. Perhaps there is no need to preserve an identity for a "movement" for peace. Perhaps the loose association of people who work for peace—or against war —will grow so fast that it will before long represent a major portion of the human race, instead of a comparatively small minority of morally concerned individuals. Meanwhile, there is value in keeping track of present changes.

In the second part of an article entitled "The New Peace Movement," in *Dissent,* Spring, 1963, Roy Finch observes:

> The development of nuclear weapons has created a new spectrum in the peace movement. This spectrum now stretches from "nuclear pacifists" at one end to "unilateralists" at the other. Nuclear pacifists are primarily opposed to nuclear weapons, rather than war in general, while unilateralists (comprising most traditional pacifists) favor varying degrees of American-initiated disarmament, regardless of what the other side does. Within these two groups and between them is a whole range of different positions. There is also a considerable overlap, since many unilateralists (borrowing a leaf from leftwing "front" methods, but without any subterfuge about it) are also active in nuclear pacifist groups and sometimes have even helped to form them.

The complications which interest in political action brings to the Peace Movement are well illustrated by the section, "The Castro Episode," in Roy Finch's article. It seems important to look somewhat closely at this question, since two weeks ago, in the editorial, MANAS quoted a pacifist writer who remarked: "Pacifists are not so much critical of violence as they are of systems or philosophies which depend upon violence for their existence, and they will not hesitate to stand behind forceful revolutionaries, while at the same time offering nonviolent solutions." Finch offers a qualifying perspective on this view:

> The revolutionary enthusiasm and unanimity of Castroism satisfied many radical pacifists who could not look beyond this enthusiasm to the totalitarian implications of the course Castro took. They refused

to see that a political structure which *makes possible continuing opposition* is the only thing that matters in the long run, since revolutionary unanimity cannot be sustained, and after it dies nothing remains in the one-party state but the enforced unanimity of the police. (There is an inevitable line where spontaneous support turns into coerced obedience, but this line is never visible in the totalitarian state. "You're happy and joyous, or into prison you go!") The revolution which fails to understand the nature of freedom (which is *always* freedom for the opposition), cannot help but turn into tyranny. In this respect Castro has betrayed freedom, and no supposed benefits or necessities (or contrasts with the horrors of the previous regime) can excuse or compensate for this. What began as a revolution for freedom abandoned that goal and turned into a reaction against freedom.

The root of the difficulty is a fatal confusion between politics and religion. Politics over-reaches itself when it attempts to do what only a church can do—combine in some inward sense unanimity and freedom, so that there is no need to make room for opposition because no one wants to oppose. The inner identity of ruler and ruled leaves no possible grounds for opposition. (To *believe—an*d one *believes* in a totalitarian ruler, whereas one only votes for or supports a democratic one —is to accept this identity.) There is only one thing wrong— these are relations between human beings and another human being and not between human beings and a god. The fusion of a whole people into oneness can only be a temporary occurrence in mundane terms. Then comes the mocking simulacrum—the unity achieved by the secret police.

Another sort of confusion, arising from political stereotypes, harasses the women's movement for peace. Following is a portion of a letter from one of the participants in the recent WISP Rome-Geneva Peace Pilgrimage. She writes concerning an incident in Geneva:

The morning the group saw the World Council of Churches, I had laryngitis. I did not rest, however, as that was the morning of crisis with our Hiroshima woman. Her limited English, our lack of Japanese language and manners, had created great distress and misunderstanding within her. The night before some of the women had taken her to a meeting of Swiss, French, and American women in Geneva. Since for once we (the Americans) were in the minority, French was spoken for the evening, and as the French women were very vocal and quite excited, the Japanese woman thought everyone was *arguing.* She heard only the words "Communist" and "Pacifist." All that had happened, I later discovered, was a heated discussion about the dilemma of peace groups which are labeled "Communist" simply because they are pacifist.

But the Japanese woman thought Communists were fighting with pacifists and, very upset, she asked me if we were Communists. I tried to explain why we had come on the Pilgrimage, that we were not Communists, that in our country anyone for peace may be *called* a Communist—like a dirty word. I hunted for simple words to explain . . . I knew no Japanese epithet that is used in this way in Japan. I asked her what she meant by "pacifist" and she said it meant a political party. She confused the words "attached" and "attacked." Nothing I could say seemed to help the situation and I found myself in a dark tunnel of confusion.

Eventually, we heard that a Japanese priest from Hiroshima had been in touch with our friend. At first we were pleased to think she had a companion who could speak her language, but it became apparent that he had told her we were probably all Communists, including the woman from the Catholic Worker group. Her terror can hardly be imagined. In fright, she locked her room-mate out of the room they shared.

We talked a long time, trying to understand each other. Her difficulty was in accepting us as she found us, in contrast to what the priest had told her. Her beliefs and faith were wavering in opposition to what she knew of us on a human level, and she felt great hysteria. . . . Here was an instance of the dilemma of our age—could we trust one another, or should we believe only the myths?

Why, indeed, label as peculiar to the "peace movement" such desperate struggles for mutual understanding? We have not simply to "make peace." The need is rather for all, pacifists or not, to create the ground for basic trust in one another as human beings.