

THE "GOOD AMERICAN"

SIR—As a writer who has spent much time in America I read Mr. Fiedler's "The Good American" in the March issue of *ENCOUNTER* with great interest. (*ENCOUNTER* can do much good by printing articles of this kind.) And, until he became metaphysical at the end of his protest, Mr. Fiedler had my sympathy. I was astonished, however, that he could dismiss in one short phrase what lies, I believe, at the very root of the European intellectual's anti-American feeling. "American mass culture among the peoples moves inexorably into Europe," Mr. Fiedler observes in passing. He should have devoted the remainder of his article to a consideration of this process. It is my belief that this huge export drive of American big business in mass culture has created more anti-American feeling among European artists and intellectuals than all the Communist propaganda put together. It may be argued that mass communications merely give people what they want, but against this some of us would argue that once mass communications are raised to a certain level of power and efficiency—and for this task America has all the necessary resources—people can be manipulated to want what it is convenient and profitable to give them. Now American writers often benefit considerably from these enterprises, not only financially but also in terms of prestige; and if American writers have ever protested against them, I have not had the good fortune yet to read their protests. It is true, as I have pointed out more than once, that the American mind, with its great talent for satire, provides most of the best antidotes for its own poisons. But this is not justly reflected in the export trade of mass culture. I agree that European writers often do not attempt to understand the background of their American colleagues. But Mr. Fiedler must make a similar effort. He should appreciate the bitter despair of men who may now feel that their very livelihood is being threatened, who see their bookstalls crowded with foreign issues of American mass publications, who have watched their theatres and cinemas succumb to Hollywood ballyhoo, and who now await

with terror the arrival of those monsters from outer space—the American-inspired TV programmes. The last thing most thoughtful men and women want to see is a world society shaped and coloured by American business men. So let us—Mr. Fiedler and I and the Italians who made him feel so uneasy—agree to do what we can to check this invasion. He can make a start at home while we do what we can here. But I suspect we will all do it better without metaphysics—and, of course, national intolerance.

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A MODEST PROPOSAL

SIR—... Mr. Kristol, with a gallantry we must applaud, comes to the relief of Miss Wedgwood's distress over the teaching of history in schools by suggesting that we abolish it, and, by so doing, not only alleviate Miss Wedgwood's anxiety but promote international understanding. He stresses the difficulty of the task, however, in the face of "vested interests." Let me strengthen his radicalism by pointing out that there is no need for his grudging resignation to its continuance: the feat of abolition which he considers almost hopeless is being achieved in Scotland, where, from next year, students will be forbidden to take history as a higher subject in their equivalent of the University Entrance examination.

This is a step in the right direction, but surely we can go further? On the basis of Miss Wedgwood's definition of a subject unsuitable for the immature, we note that it is not the achievement of puberty which gives us the necessary understanding to read, for example, Miss Wedgwood's books, but an experience of the world which could not be described as "little."

I do not think that Mr. Kristol would claim the experience of the average undergraduate—with which he is familiar—to be large. I suggest, then, that we abolish the subject not only in schools but in universities. Further, by the same definition, we should prohibit literature, philosophy, political science and any other subject in which compression

and simplification are misleading and dangerous. Logically we must, unless we consider Hamlet's actions more readily understandable than Napoleon's, Plato simpler than the Norman Conquest, and the structure of the American Constitution easier to grasp than its origin—unless, of course, we abolish logic too.

Mr. Kristol's irritation with the average man's assumption of knowledge concerning Colonialism, Progress, and Reaction, and the origins of war, provokes sympathy. He points out that a century ago these recondite subjects were excluded from the schoolroom, and implies that our great-grandfathers, not having been unmanned by false simplifications, found it more difficult to misunderstand the policies of foreign governments or to attribute unjust motives to other nations. Misled by reading history, I had understood that it was not these subjects which were excluded from school but our great-grandfathers.

Mr. Kristol suggests that the study of history should be confined to "the happy few" (by "happy" I assume he considers the study might be a privilege—and, indeed, privileges are usually to the few). History could then take its rightful place as a foible of a minority, like stamp-collecting. Apart from the other advantages, this would leave the curriculum free for the greater study of arithmetic, which gives us balance-sheets, mathematics, which gives us bombers, and reading, which, untouched by literature, philosophy or history, gives us the daily newspaper. It is obvious that in a subject where the truth is difficult to ascertain it is not worth seeking. . . .

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THE IDEA OF ASIA

SIR—European languages are, as François Bondy points out in your January number "Does 'Asia' Exist?", a medium of intercourse between different Asian cultures. However, when students of Tamil and Bengali literature communicate with each other in English, it does not follow that contacts through an Indian medium are impossible or that Bengalis and Tamilians are more akin to the English than to each other. As a matter of fact, in India concrete steps are being taken to replace English by Hindu as the state language. It is difficult to say whether the sciences, conceived as they are in terms of modern European languages, can be successfully propagated in an Indian language, but there is no reason why this experiment should fail in other directions.

Mr. Bondy to the contrary, on close scrutiny a common Asia does emerge from the mass of contradictions and counter-currents that go to make this

vast continent. This is an attitude-of-mind Asia, not a political or cultural one. It gets its life-blood from the memories (or fear) of Western domination and the passive nationalism that characterises the people of this region. A similar unity exists in present-day Europe. The Soviet threat has done more to unify Europe than any sentiment or binding force that could have been of spontaneous origin. This unity is, both for Europe and Asia, a negative unity—a unity based on common hatreds rather than similar aims and objectives.

To me as an Asian, or should I say an Indian, Mr. Bondy's assertion that there exists no common Asian culture and tradition appears self-evident. It was largely European ignorance or indifference that insisted on lumping together such diverse peoples—diverse in both outlook and national temperament—as say the Japanese and the Indians under one common denominator. Anything or anyone east of Suez belonged to the mysterious, the exotic Orient! With the possible exception of the United States there does not exist any sizeable land-mass the people of which can be said to possess a truly common culture. This outstanding exception to a general rule finds a ready explanation in the manner in which the American continent was progressively colonised by immigrants from Europe and their subsequent expansion westwards. . . .

RAVINDER KUMAR

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SIR—M. François Bondy's observations on Asia in *ENCOUNTER*, No. 4, exhibit the habitual approach of a Western mind towards Asia. How difficult it is for a Westerner to evaluate the complex matrix of our continent! . . .

Nehru once emphasised the presence of an "Asian temper." It is more evident to us than to the Westerner. . . . The cleavage in our cultural tradition is the result of the appearance of the Colonial Powers on the historical scene in the early 19th century. We were overwhelmed by the impact of a new culture. Prior to the British advent, India had been able to absorb the heterogeneous culture of such victor nations as the Greeks, Moguls, and Pathans. The nature of the British conquest was distinguished from the earlier ones in this respect: it made a cultural conquest of India. It disrupted the old organic cultural unity by disestablishing the rural craft economy. . . .

A Mohammedan in East Pakistan is different from a Beluchi or an Afridi in West Pakistan. In matters of outlook, dress, language, and way of living, he is closer to a West Bengal Hindu in

India. An uninitiated Western eye is apt to misjudge the outer shell as the inner core. The course of Imperialism (which is dead now in most parts of Asia save to petty slogan mongers) disrupted our cultural unity. Industrial expansion created a class of people whose sphere of education was severely limited to the exigencies of administrations. It was an education which was inimical to the growth of our own culture. . . . The backwash of past legacies still survives. I am no philistine in matters of culture, and we have certainly immeasurably benefited by Western culture. But we were till recently under the penumbra of isolation from our immediate neighbours and from our own people's culture, and we have just begun the process of rediscovering ourselves. We are trying to pick up the lost thread of contact that snapped 150 years or so ago. This cultural, as well as commercial, intercourse persisted even before the birth of Christ. We knew each other better than we know ourselves now. . . . The presence of the West with its imposition of an alien culture has been a powerful force dispelling this sense of oneness among us.

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THE REAL MAHLER

SIR—Mahler is not so much underrated, as Mr. Humphrey Searle says in the December number of *ENCOUNTER*, as *unknown* in this country. Apart from a rare and superb performance of "Das Lied von der Erde" under Bruno Walter, or of the lovely Fourth Symphony under Sir Thomas Beecham the rest are uniformly execrable: as often as not the players don't even know the notes let alone the music, and the conductors don't seem to be well qualified to lead them into either.

The Mahler symphonies are exceedingly exacting in their demands; they are the work of one of the greatest masters of the orchestra of all time, a master who did not just orchestrate but thought in terms of the orchestra. Conductors who, as so many of them do,

with wind drum blunderbuss and thunder

rend, with tremendous sound your ears asunder'

and think that that is the beginning and end of a Mahler performance would do well to turn their attention to a more suitable occupation, say house-breaking. As for the generality of "critical" ("God give us patience!") opinion here as to Mahler's prolixity, longwindedness, the banality, and triteness of his musical matter—when I first started studying the Mahler Symphonies thirty or so years ago, and

heard the kind of performance we know all too well here, I thought much the same. It was only as I got to know them, as it were, from the inside, that I began to realise with astonished delight that the banalities, the trivialities, the *longueurs* were not in Mahler at all but in what his performers made of him.

It is said—indeed I myself first said it twenty years ago—that there was possibly some spiritual incompatibility of temper between the English audience and Mahler (as there is between Elgar and the Latin-European audience) and that his work would possibly never make much headway here. Be that as it may, performances that are mangled travesties, hardly more than public read-throughs, are no sort of basis for the estimation of work as complex and intricate as that of Mahler, or for that matter, of anyone.

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SELF-IMPOSED CENSORSHIP

SIR—While the unsatisfactory nature of the official machinery of censorship of literary and scientific works is well known, it is perhaps less generally realised that various bodies within the book-trade itself exercise a censorship which is almost more alarming because it is insidious.

A recent instance is provided by Mr. G. Rattray Taylor's book *Sex in History*. This was widely and favourably reviewed: and the name of the author and that of the general editor of the series of which it is a part, Mrs. Jacquetta Hawkes, by themselves indicate, what the perusal of the book confirms, that it is a sober and significant work, of considerable public interest. Nevertheless, one of the largest firms of booksellers in Britain has advised the majority of its branches that they should not stock it, while one of the largest lending libraries in the country has instructed its branches that the book should not be bought except at the direct request of a subscriber, and that even then it should not be placed on the shelves.

While the question can hardly be divorced from the larger issue of the unsatisfactory nature of our approach to the control of literary works generally, yet it is surely undesirable that private bodies should undertake the responsibility of discouraging the sale of works of repute—and least of all the book-trade, whose proper task is surely to encourage the sale of such works.

KATHLEEN NOTT

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THE GREAT BOW

“WHEN the West slumbers, the East awakens”—so, if I remember correctly, runs the old adage, and its interpretations, at this moment of history, can be many. Inwardly interpreted, it may mean no more than this: that when the West slumbers within us, the East comes to life in the psyche. When our own inherited patterns of Western thought begin to go sterile—when they no longer yield the life-giving waters—we go to the East, like ancient Rome, for our new gods. Since the end of the War, I have been impressed by the fact that a number of American soldiers returning from the occupation of Japan have become interested in Zen Buddhism. The numbers, in my experience, were hardly so great that one could even begin to think of anything near a “trend”; but there was something in the spectacle of these good Methodist boys from the Middle West becoming fascinated by one of the most remarkable and typical expressions of the East that gave me pause, and summoned up the ancient image of conquering Rome being conquered by the gods of the peoples it had conquered. The West, we must remember, has always gone to the East for its gods (including Christianity), and it may be the mark of this particular period of history that the intellectual brilliance of the West, if it is to avoid destroying itself by neurosis, will have to learn some of the spiritual techniques of the East—even while the East itself seems hell-bent on cutting itself off from its past and acquiring the secrets of Western technology and power. The opposites, it would seem, must always pass into each other for the sake of completion.

The problem of our culture is the religious problem. I consider this a purely empirical generalisation based on my observation of American intellectuals, most of whom, whether conscious of it or not, are dying of spiritual inanition. Not much has changed since the days when T. S. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land*. Re-reading that poem recently, after many years away from it, I found it still crackling with all kinds of high-voltage electricity. If not his greatest, it is certainly Eliot’s most brilliant poem, and still a parable for Western intellectuals in our time. What unbearable nervousness in that poem, how desperately haunted it is by the religious symbols of the past, and how compulsively and blindly (at that time) Eliot clutches for some symbol that will connect up his mind with his feelings! Such, always, is the psychological efficacy of the religious symbol for the intellectual. The bleak, brittle, ironic, negative feeling of Eliot’s earlier poems reaches its culmination in the nervousness of *The Waste Land*, and it is significant that the first real flow of *positive* feeling appears in his poetry only with *Ash Wednesday* after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. This inability to feel, since *Faust*, has been a haunting theme of the modern intellectual, and it has very much to do with the death of Western religion. But where Eliot found the reconciling symbol, thousands have been unable to follow him; and even in a few converts I have seen a strangling of the individual within the Catholic structure, the problem of his psychological wholeness still remaining unsolved after conversion. The spiritual problem of Western man—intellectual and non-intellectual, believer and non-believer