

# LETTERS

## Mr. Anderson and Admass

IN YOUR current number—and also in the book Declaration Mr. Lindsay Anderson writes:

*"... Artists and intellectuals who despise the people, imagine themselves superior to them, and think it clever to talk about the 'Ad-Mass' are both cutting themselves off from necessary experience, and shirking their responsibilities...."*

The term *Admass*, now in fairly common use among literary journalists, was first coined by me—see the passage headed *New Names in Journey Down A Rainbow*. It is not a description of any kind of people but a name given to an economic-industrial-social-cultural system that is American in origin but is now taking over most of the Western world. And I for one mistrust and dislike *Admass*, but this has nothing to do with despising people, cutting oneself off from necessary experience, shirking one's responsibilities.

J. B. PRIESTLEY

London, W.1

## "Zero and the Impossible"

MAY I make two points in connection with the article by Martin Seymour-Smith in the November ENCOUNTER?

Firstly, to complain that logic and logical analysis are "loveless," "neutralised," and "bleak," is rather like complaining that tennis-courts are hard and flat and hemmed-in by wire-netting.

Secondly, the comments on the work of Ryle and Ayer, at the end of the article, are further depressing evidence of the resentment which is only too often aroused when the irritating force of plain unadorned reasoning clashes with other, more cherished, habits of thought.

G. B. KEENE

University of North Staffs,  
Keele, Staffs.

IN HIS article "Zero and the Impossible" (ENCOUNTER, November), Mr. Seymour-Smith sets out to consider four very different writers whose only affinity is, as he himself admits, "this sad coincidence" of their recent death. In order to avoid writing four unrelated pieces, he poses a criterion

for good writing, in the light of which he will consider each of them. This criterion is their ability to devise "a poetic language... in which it is possible to communicate an apprehension of reality." Yet when the turn of Joyce Cary comes, Mr. Seymour-Smith says that "We should be unwise... to make a serious attempt to assess the degree of his creative intelligence." His condemnation of Cary does not then rest on Cary's failure to measure up to the set standard, for the measurement is never made. There is no attempt to assess the quality of his prose, to examine his success in communicating an "apprehension of reality." Rather does Mr. Seymour-Smith concern himself with the question of the validity of Cary's reality. Such a concern is, in fact, more appropriate to the work of a novelist than is a pre-occupation with linguistic analysis. Yet having reached the right path apparently by accident, Mr. Seymour-Smith seems to stumble along it, without seeing where it leads him.

In the first place, he criticises what he terms Cary's "Anti-moralistic" outlook. By this, he seems to mean the failure of Cary's characters to see any conflict between their own actions, and some objective standard of morality which they recognise. Gully Jimson has no other standard of conduct than his need to express himself as an artist, Nimmo no scruples in his power-lust. Each deceives himself in order to justify his own actions. What Mr. Seymour-Smith fails to recognise is that Cary did not deceive himself, nor did he attempt to deceive us. The conflict is there if we wish to see it. He shows us how these people have shirked the conflict. There is no need for us to do so.

More important, he fails to observe Cary's achievement in establishing communication both between us and his characters, and between the characters themselves. Nina's understanding of Nimmo, for instance, is very much greater than she will allow herself to realise. For if she did realise it, her happiness would vanish; such is her superficiality. The same might be said of the dream-world in which Mr. Johnson lives; yet the fact is that these people, far from being uncomplicated, ignore their complexities in order to be able to act. Mr. Seymour-Smith would have us believe that Cary's characters live in an Antinomian world, where nothing matters provided one is saved; where what Cary was in fact doing was trying to resolve, as every novelist does, the dichotomy between freewill and determinism. If his solution appears Antinomian, it is not so much that he comes

down on the side of determinism, as that he refuses to judge his characters, refuses to admit that anyone would deliberately choose to do evil. It is a case of "*tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*"; one may judge the outcome of someone's actions, but not the man himself. It is a measure of his success in communication that we are enabled to understand his characters.

Mr. Seymour-Smith finds himself forced to admit that Cary's description of life is accurate: surely there can be no higher praise for a novelist?

I. YASS

Norwich, Norfolk

IT WEARIES me to think that whether or not I write this letter Mr. Martin Seymour-Smith and others like him will continue in their muddleheadedness and misunderstandings of modern philosophy; but just for the record:

I can think of no philosopher, certainly not Professors Ayer or Ryle, who would have the least comprehension of what Mr. Seymour-Smith might mean by the "verifiable statement of modern logic." Sentences in logical calculi are tautologies and a fortiori *neither* statements *nor* verifiable. Logicians who are building "artificial languages" (again neither Professors Ryle or Ayer belong to this group) are not in competition with poets as is implied. They are but investigating the properties of mathematical systems which is a legitimate branch of knowledge whether or not it is "a gormless complement of poetic language."

But when Mr. Seymour-Smith tells us that "logical analysis performs the useful function of demonstrating the unverifiability, or plain wrongness of almost everything we say or take for granted," then I but gasp at such silliness and ask him to choose some other, and not so patently absurd a way to pad his article.

KENNETH STERN

London, W.11

It is not uncommon to find an argument refuted on the grounds on which it is put forth. But seldom has this been done more obviously than by Mr. Seymour-Smith (November issue) when he equates philosophy with poetry in a somewhat muddled epistemological theory. This attempt was not only superfluous to his article, it was superfluous in a befuddled and harmful way.

The demand from a poem that it be "... a description of an experience of the 'truth'... so exact that it is immediately communicable..." seems to imply that Mr. Smith regards poetry as the essence of philosophical inquiry, or further, that it is the result of infallible intuitions of the nature which permit him to know that "Poetic statements are nearer to reality itself than those 'useful' assertions which appear to be purely factual, but which logical analysis rightly shows are not necessarily true."

Indeed, if he could convince us that he is in

possession of knowledge of "reality itself," then logic would be abandoned for a more comprehensive system of rhyme and rhythm. But I hesitate to vouch for a philosophical system which would reveal even the tentative hypothesis that

*"The noonday azure strumming all its rays  
Sang that a famous battle had been won."*

His equation of philosophical and poetic statements leads to odd deductions. A strange perspective, indeed, that admits that "logical analysis performs the useful function of demonstrating the unverifiability, or plain wrongness, of almost everything we say..." leaving only "... a series of 'verifiable' statements... characterised by the essentially trivial nature of the sense which these statements actually contain." If this were in fact true, then it would follow that poetic *utterances* (or as Mr. Smith would have it, *assertions*) which, being "a description of an experience of the 'truth'..." would, in fact, be verifiable and hence "essentially trivial"....

ROBIN SANBORN

Department of Philosophy  
Universität Wien  
Vienna, Austria

### "Back to the Mines"

TO THE sad fate of Milovan Djilas there is much to be said (ENCOUNTER, October issue), but perhaps one small literary footnote might be added, for I was reminded of the ancient Greek tale of Philoxenos. When Philoxenos poured scorn on the poems of the tyrant Dionysos, he was sentenced to slave labour in the mines. Some time later he was again asked to listen to the verse of the tyrant. But he did not listen for long, and turned to go. Dionysos asked him where he was going, and Philoxenos replied, "Back to the mines..."

MELVIN J. LASKY

Berlin

### Polish Post

FURTHER to the report in your department, "From the Other Shore" (November) that books and journals sent from abroad do not reach addresses in Poland. The local G.P.O. is in receipt of a directive POC 31.7.57 which says that "No documents... printed matter, books, sketches... etc., may be sent by post if they contain matter prejudicial to Polish laws and customs."

For the record, friends in Poland have not received any magazines sent after July, 1957, though they were received before that date throughout 1957. These magazines, which presumably "contain matter prejudicial to Polish laws and customs," were *Woman*, *Woman's Own*, *Mickey Mouse Weekly*, *Robin*, *Playbox*, and *Tarzan Comics*.

H. G. WILLIAMS

Newbury, Berkshire

## Innocence and Politics

MR. Dwight Macdonald\* is, as we all know, a man with a past: a past that he resought and captured for our delight only a few months ago in these columns, in a series of articles distinguished by their wit, their incisiveness, their high intelligent drollery. For ten years or more, it seems, Mr. Macdonald lived at the centre—if so amorphous a terrain may be said to have a centre—of American left-wing intellectual life. He worked for, and broke with, the *Nation*, the *New International*, *Partisan Review*: he had controversies with James B. Cannon, with Burnham, with Trotsky: he learnt to distinguish (as one might in an examination be asked to distinguish) between the Fieldites and the Stammites, the Oehlerites and the Marlenites: he was himself liberal, fellow-traveller, Trotskyite, ex-Trotskyite, anarchist, pacifist by turn.

"There it is," was how he concluded his articles, "and there I am." But some time before this the reader must have suspected—perhaps from that unusual mixture of extravagant unsolemnity and a sort of muted nostalgia which defines the Macdonald style—that there was something "a bit different" about this particular revolutionist's attitude to his radical years. For he writes about them in none of the accepted manners, not as a criminal about his past, nor as a grown-up about his childhood, but most, perhaps, like a traveller about his travels. He doesn't protest that he couldn't possibly think how he'd ever brought himself to do what he did, nor does he tell us how he would do it all over again if he had the chance: his attitude seems rather to be that he wouldn't do it again, certainly, but because and just because he has already done it once. Radicalism seems to have been for Mr. Macdonald what might in the broadest sense of the word be called an adventure: and adventures done are adventures finished with. To draw a parallel: Macdonald may be said to have been a radical in much the same way as Orwell was a down-and-out. Force of circumstances, the spirit of the age, a taste for experience, a deep discontent with things as they are, all must have conspired and worked together to impel him on his route: but in the whole concatenation of contributory conditions there was, I think, nothing that corresponded directly to

his own inner nature or essence. Macdonald has proved himself to be a man who can be a radical: but there is nothing to suggest that he is a man who must be a radical. Above all, nothing in this collection of his radical writings.

What Macdonald is, is (if we want labels) an Innocent. And while an Innocent is very likely to resemble a Radical in that he also will feel a profound discontent with established society, he is sharply to be distinguished from the Radical in the source or ground of his discontent. For whereas the Radical is the man who, armed with certain principles, inspired by a certain vision of the world, confronts society as it is and tries to see it in terms of these principles, of this vision, the Innocent is the man who confronts society as it is and tries to see it—as it is. Ordinarily, in the Innocent's message, our eyes look out on the world clouded by convention, prejudice, deceit, by comfortable lying beliefs and theories, by the whole horrible spawn of hypocrisy and self-interest and self-importance, and so it is not surprising that we see it as we want it to be, the faults all on *their* side, the good all on *ours*. If, however, we want to be sane in politics, we must make an effort of the will, and tear away the blinkers, the filters, the distorting lenses of belief and custom, and see things cleaned down, close up, raw.

It is of just this kind of vision that *The Responsibility of Peoples* (for the most part a collection of articles from Macdonald's own periodical *Politics*) offers us page after page. In every essay he brings us up short in front of some famous happening belonging to the recent past but already enshrined in history, stares very hard at it, and the Emperor's clothes fall away. In consequence, this book is undoubtedly one of the liveliest examples of contemporary political writing: in its pages—clever, paradoxical, ingenious, passionate—vitality itself seems to take on new life. If here and there the trick doesn't work, this is of course in the fugitive nature of the *genre*: the subject-matter just happens to be too remote, too irrelevant for us, here, now, to care either way. But I think that whenever in reading the book I found that I was not moved by a particular piece, I also found myself wishing that I had read the piece at the time, when I could and did care.

The point about the Innocent could be put, one might think, by saying that he tries everywhere, at all points, to substitute direct, for indirect,

\* *The Responsibility of Peoples and Other Essays in Political Criticism*. By DWIGHT MACDONALD. Victor Gollancz. 21s. net.