

Return to Galilee

***The Vindication of Liberal Theology: A Tract for the Times*, by Henry P. Van Dusen (Scribners, 192 pp. \$3.50), argues that liberal theology is more than a passing phase of modern religious thought. Chad Walsh, an Episcopal priest and chairman of the English Department at Beloit College, recently published a pioneer study of dystopian fiction, "From Utopia to Nightmare."**

By CHAD WALSH

FOR MANY years president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Henry Van Dusen has had ample opportunity to observe the waxing and waning of assorted theologies. During his lifetime theological liberalism, at floodtide in the early part of the century, has visibly retreated in the face of neo-orthodoxy and still newer adversaries. Now, in his fifteenth book, the author moves to the counterattack. *The Vindication of Liberal Theology*, an expansion of lectures given at Sweet Briar College, maintains that liberal theology represents not merely an honest attempt to come to grips with modern scientific and secular thought at their best, but that—in its rediscovery of the centrality of the historical Jesus—it is the purest form of Christianity since the days of the apostles, and is the necessary starting point for future religious thought.

Dr. Van Dusen sees "liberalism" as a middle ground between Modernism, which panics and sells out to recent secular thought, and Neo-Orthodoxy, which disavows a great deal of modern thought and then, after reaffirming the historic Christian faith, tries to assimilate any elements of current ideologies that will fit in. The main object of liberalism is to get back to the Jesus of history, to discover what he really believed about God and man's relation with man and God. "Congruity with the mind of Christ" is the touchstone to separate the genuine truths of Christianity from later spurious additions and distortions.

This book is not one to be adequately discussed in brief compass. Certainly, it scores some telling points, particularly in the demonstration that liberal theology is closely associated with a dynamic drive, the determination to do the practical things demanded by the Christian

sense of justice and compassion. Here theological liberalism has created a tradition that has profoundly influenced even its competitors, such as Neo-Orthodoxy. On the other hand, it should be pointed out that liberalism is not the only source of the social gospel—one thinks also of the Catholic encyclicals.

Dr. Van Dusen is strong on Christ, weak on the Church, its sacraments, and the living tradition of the continuous Christian community. It is true that he pays serious attention to the consensus of the faithful when moral dilemmas must be resolved, but he apparently does not attach the same importance to centuries-old and living tradition when the questions are more strictly theological. Here he is inclined to suspect "barnacles" that have attached themselves to the ship of truth. He is devoured by a passion to return again to the mind of Christ and discover the pristine gospel of the Galilean days.

Thus the passionately Christ-centered faith of the author rises or falls by the substantial accuracy of the picture of Jesus given in the Gospels. Here Dr. Van Dusen, unable to lean primarily on either the continuous tradition of the Church or the automatic inerrancy of the Bible, finds himself driven toward an eloquent but unprovable act of faith. The "real Jesus" is not self-evident. Different people find different Jesuses in the Scriptures; there are various strands of modern theological thought that contend the historical Jesus is forever unknowable; some assert that all we have is a churchly image, a kind of divine symbol. As long ago as the turn of the century Albert Schweitzer insisted that the "liberal Jesus" was a construct of nineteenth-century liberals who made Christ in their own likeness, and that the actual Jesus was probably a fiery zealot more like some modern cultist proclaiming the end of the world. That Dr. Van Dusen emerges with a Jesus not too different from that of traditional Christian faith, and that he is convinced God was uniquely manifest in Jesus, is an indication that his liberalism stands in a relation of greater continuity with the churchly tradition than might at first be suspected. Indeed, in making the Incarnation the key to faith, Dr. Van Dusen links himself more closely with traditional orthodoxy than with radically reductionist theories. He is more conservative than he thinks he is.

In any case, this testament of faith is the work of a man whose deep devotion to the center of his faith, Jesus of Nazareth, is alive on every page. It is a book that proclaims a serene and unshaken faith. One wishes only that the author would now write the same book at double or triple its length, with greater attention to the theological debates now raging, so that the theologians would be able to debate it in precise detail. Liberalism has found a sturdy defender, and *The Vindication of Liberal Theology* is sufficient proof that its reported demise is an exaggeration.

Mephistopheles in Modern Dress: As I was reading *Faust Revisited: Some Thoughts on Satan* (Seabury, \$3.95), a bit of half-remembered doggerel kept running through my mind:

The Devil is voted not to be
And so the Devil is gone;
But some of us keep wondering,
Who carries the business on?

Marshall W. Fishwick, teacher, historian, and author, familiar to readers of SR (a chapter of the present book appeared in March 1963 under the title, "Dark Thoughts in the Black Forest"), has here produced an engrossing volume on a topic that engages us all—the problem of evil and how it manifests itself today. Written with wit and insight, it is a serious, even a profound book.

The author draws on a wide variety of sources: Scripture, history, psychology, modern philosophy, a visit to the legendary *Fauststube* in the hamlet of Stauf, the Nuremberg Trials, Coventry, the theatre of the Absurd, cartoons, the movies, suburbia, as evidence of how "the business" is still being carried on by His Satanic Majesty. Yet this is a hopeful book, for when Satan has done his worst there is still man's incredible, invincible faith. Fishwick sees in modern literature (Hemingway, Faulkner, T. S. Eliot) and in art (Grosz, Picasso, Schoenberg, de Kooning) religious insights in a modern idiom. He quotes Paul Tillich: "Religion is the state of being ultimately concerned."

Fishwick is himself concerned, and calls for man and the Church—"the Church Militant"—to put on the whole armor of God (hope, faith, love, forgiveness) to join battle with the evil in our culture and in man himself.

As St. Paul says, "For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" This is no "uncertain sound."

—EDWIN DANIELS.

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

Column Two should read: 2, 8, 3, 4, 6, 1, 7, 5.

Editor's Last Stand

Summer Storm, by Charles Angoff (Yoseloff 569 pp. \$5.95), portrays a cynical, Mencklenlike editor and the decline of his magazine. Daniel Stern frequently comments on new fiction.

By DANIEL STERN

FOR THE past twelve years Charles Angoff has been constructing a mosaic of novels intended to form a definitive picture of Jewish life in America. Starting with *Journey to the Dawn* he has chronicled the career of the Polonsky family, who migrated from Russia to the United States in the first decade of the century. With *Summer Storm* Mr. Angoff has reached the 1930s. Here his protagonist, David Polonsky, is ensconced in New York, where he acts as a kind of mirror for the events and meanings of that disturbed decade.

The chief action of the book revolves around the decline and death of a magazine, *The American World*, on which David is employed. (This is a lightly disguised version of the old *American Mercury*, on which Mr. Angoff served as managing editor.) As emotional and intellectual spokesman for the author David gives us his portrait of the cynical, boob-baiting editor of the magazine, Harry Brandt (for whom read H. L. Mencken).

Given this confrontation, an exciting clash of ideas seems to be impending between Angoff the humanist and Brandt-Mencken the avowed Nietzschean. Unfortunately, *Summer Storm* is suffused with warmth but gives little light. The reason is, I think, that the subject matter Angoff tackles here is not responsive to the kind of self-indulgent emotionalism that comes to him too easily and too often. The problem of sustaining social or religious belief in the midst of an apparently crumbling society needs a more disciplined understanding, as well as a controlled artistic presentation.

This is also true of the question of Jewishness which Angoff's characters debate frequently but without any deepening of insight. The result is usually something like this one-sentence monologue by David:

... and David listened and marveled and filled in and he was dazzled and appalled and bewildered and repelled

and attracted, and as he listened he was glad and sad and exhilarated and depressed and mystified by the ways of life among all people, and especially among the Jews, for it occurred to him, as he listened . . . that perhaps Jews were really more alive and more human than other people, and perhaps this was what was meant by the phrase, "The Chosen People" . . .

It is not fair, of course, to judge a book by one sentence. But disturbingly similar passages occur in every chapter, all marked by equally imprecise thought and style. Strangely, within such painful limitations, Angoff's people can be appealing. They have what is well expressed by a unique Jewish

word: *menschlichkeit*, which can be roughly translated as decency, maturity, responsibility. Without this quality there can be no major writing; but in the creation of interesting and meaningful characters it is, by itself, absolutely inadequate. (The one exception here is Brandt, the Mencken paraphrase. He is, as was his original, sharp, salty, slightly salacious, and real.)

In *Summer Storm* we are given the atmosphere and occurrences of the Thirties, featuring the demise of a once-vital magazine. One knows Angoff was there; one knows it all happened much as it is presented. Yet the feeling is inescapable that the one thing missing is, in Hemingway's simple and perfect phrase, "the way it was."

Angoff is attempting the enormous and valuable task of interpreting American life from the Jewish angle of refraction. What his new book proves is that sympathy needs an accompanying tough spine of detachment and insight. Compassion alone is self-defeating.

Disastrous Liaisons

Elective Affinities, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, translated by Elizabeth Mayer and Louise Bogan (Regnery. 305 pp. \$5.95), offers a new English version of a classic novel about the elemental power of love. Joseph P. Bauke is an editor of "Germanic Review."

By JOSEPH P. BAUKE

"I AM sorry that you do not like it, it is my best book," Goethe said to a lady who disapproved of *Elective Affinities* on moral grounds. Published in 1809, when Goethe was sixty, this classic novel about the elemental power of love resumes the theme of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the work of the youthful author, but its mood and outlook are totally different. Werther, with his caprices and sentimentalities, would be quite impossible in the rarefied air of the country estate where the story of the fateful affinities unfolds.

Here all spontaneity is sacrificed to ritual and routine, and decorum is maintained when all other conventions collapse. With an infinity of detail, *leitmotifs*, and subtle parallelisms, Goethe captures the particularity of atmosphere and, from the first, throws a lugubrious light on the scene that forebodes catastrophe. The title, borrowed

from a chemical treatise, indicates that natural forces beyond man's ken or control play a decisive role in this extraordinary and unforgettable novel.

If the four characters and their shifting alliances are complex, the plot is not. After humdrum marriages of convenience Eduard and Charlotte, friends in their youth, have finally married and live the idle and formalized life of the landed gentry. Their guests are the Captain and Charlotte's foster-daughter Ottilie, a lovely and mysterious young girl who gradually acquires the severe dignity of a tragic heroine. The affections ending in disaster run alongside ordinary life before they swell into a tide that cannot be stopped. The hostess and the Captain manage to escape from each other, while the other couple experience the agonies of a passion that grips them like a disease.

The disintegration of a marriage is the ostensible theme, and on one level *Elective Affinities* belongs to the European tradition of the novel of manners. There are the expected setpieces: the clandestine tryst, the parties, the amusements, and the *ennui* beneath the polite conversation. But not far below this surface the work is concerned with the acceptance of life's vicissitudes, with renunciation and death. Who can tell what is choice and what is destiny, what compulsion and what free will?

This new translation, equipped with