

## THE TWO VOICES OF HISTORY

By P. SERRACINO INGLOTT

THE past is dead; by definition it no longer exists, yet sometimes it comes back to us so vividly that we feel we are its prisoners. But if the past strikes us at times by its elusiveness and at others by its ineluctability, the paradox does not lie perhaps in the past itself, but rather in men's own attitudes towards it. Sometimes they wish to preserve it, to keep it intact forever: their closets are filled with bottles, old clothes, concealed mementoes; their houses with old clocks, medallions, portraits, shells; their churches with tombs, tablets, brasses, regimental flags; their cities with monuments, museums, and arches. Then other times come when they wish to destroy these remembrances, to forget the past and wash the slate of memory clean. They tear up their old letters and burn the faded photographs; the statues of the Stalins, till lately the objects of near idolatrous cults, topple down. But both attempts, to capture the past as if with a butterfly net or to slip out of its grasp, are obviously doomed to failure; however hard one tries to shut out the noise from one's ears, at one's back one will 'always hear Time's winged chariot hurrying near', and however hard one tries to recover the past, one will always find, as Professor Ryle has said in a different context, that one fails to catch more than the flying coat-tails of that which one is pursuing, for the quarry is itself the hunter.

Still more strikingly, this dual attitude to the past betrays itself at the level of political history, in the sempiternal clashes between the radical and the conservative tempers. The former, from Mirabeau to Bevan, urge us to look at reality with the naked eye instead of through the smoked glasses inherited from our grandparents, the latter from Burke to Lord Hailsham warn us perennially that what saves us from chaos is habit, what creates order amid the flux of facts is tradition. However, there is only a seeming paradox if one says that those ages when the conservative and stabilizing spirit predominates have a less intense historical consciousness than the radical and revolutionizing ones. The conservative is anxious to discount the importance of historical changes. 'Burke', Professor Butterfield himself tells us, 'tended to confirm the nation in its belief that the liberties of this country went back to times immemorial'. While for conservatives, the past has this flavour of indefiniteness, radicals feel enclosed within a vast but essentially limited historical horizon. Staunch

conservatives, like the theologians of the Middle Ages, though they knew that they had been preceded by a long procession of successive generations, still felt the past to be qualitatively homogeneous. This frame of mind made it possible for brilliant men like Aquinas never to bother about the authenticity of the Pseudo-Dionysius. That it seems puzzling to us how the writings of a sixth century neoplatonist could have been for so long unquestioningly accepted as those of a disciple of St. Paul is clear proof that our own attitude to the past is different. Exact dates were for the medievals a matter of more or less useless erudition – a not very significant label stuck to an event to help in its identification and cataloguing. Today, we feel that unless we know a writer's dates, we cannot fully understand him. His actions and sayings will acquire a different meaning according to the historical framework into which we fit him. Nor does a work of art deliver a message beyond time; for us, it is internally conditioned by the date of its first appearance. But the medievals did not bother about more than a rough localisation in time. Was not Truth eternal? How then could the significance of something that was worth saying two hundred years ago dissolve with the mere passage of time? Dates, likewise, had no place in hagiography: for the medievals, sanctity was at bottom always the same; they did not worry, like the modern Christian, about its having to garb itself in different historical forms in different ages. The chronology of the past became logically a minor matter; the specific characteristics of each epoch were frequently blurred lest they should impede the contemplation of unchanging Truth.

The tendency of the historian who does not wish to challenge the customs, beliefs and social institutions which he found in existence at his birth, which he sees continuing with little change throughout his lifetime, and which he believes likely to last for ever, is to divest history, as it were, of its temporality and turn its particular events, their contexts reduced to merely accidental relevance, into myths. Like Professor Butterfield, he feels that history should be taught as 'a modern equivalent of Aesop's fables' and holds that 'the method must adequate to its purpose is perhaps the mere telling of stories to the very young, possibly with a side-glance at some moral that may be drawn from the narrative'. And doubtless the moral ideals of nations have been more profoundly affected by the traditional myths and fables that have been presented to them as paradigms of noble and heroic conduct than by the enunciation of rules of an abstract Kantian type. Christ was not the only teacher to preach ethics by means of parables. This normative function is fulfilled for the conservative by his sense of the past. An essential feature of the technique is to eviscerate the 'pastness' out of past events. The stories that can serve

the purpose of being doctrinal to the nation have to convey a timeless message; their historical context only serves, if anything, to provide an added picturesqueness. If Raleigh had worn a khaki raincoat, instead of a rich cloak, the story would be somewhat devalued but its point could still be strongly made. And Henry's speech at Agincourt surely provides sturdier nourishment for the soul than dusty academic disputations about the exact figure of his troops. The historical significance of events is implicit within them; they mean what they point out by having a point. For the conservative therefore, if Lord Russell will forgive the travesty, 'the unimportance of time is the gateway to historical wisdom'. This happy sense of the past tends to prevail when no forebodings of danger threaten established order and the social stability of a nation.

When however the dominant feeling of society is that 'behind the ermine cape is the sealing-wall and the broken windows; underfoot lies the dust and rubble of bombs that have not yet descended', the factor of change is driven to the forefront of human attention. If the typical feature of the conservative sense of the past is the depiction of history as a fairly disjointed series of self-contained episodes, the radical sense of the past is typified by the refusal to see significance in a historical event unless as part of a self-metamorphosing whole. Each historical event is a fragment of an unfinished mosaic, its meaning not only undiscovered outside its place in the design but shifting as new bits are added to the growing pattern. Metaphysically, the conservative conceives reality as Being, the radical as Becoming. The past is for the latter not a series of colourful but static magic-lantern slides, but a closely-connected film sequence in constant motion. Radicals have, however, described the historical movement in three different ways. The Optimists picture it as forward in a perhaps slightly deviating line, the Pessimists as round in a circle, and Professor Toynbee as a fusion of both these forms. The first two theories are, I think, twentieth-century secular disguises for the two living traditions of the religious interpretation of history. The Positivists' pedigree is the Judeo-Christian eschatological vision of the past; the Spenglerites derive from Hellenic and Eastern sources their doctrine that we are fixed on the 'Faustian' switchback of a historical cycle hurtling to disaster. Professor Toynbee has tried to reconcile the belief in the 'elemental rhythm of yin and yang' and the Hellenic life-cycles of growth and decay with his belief in a progressive revelation of divine truth in history by arguing that the perpetual turning of a wheel is not vain repetition if with each revolution it is carrying a vehicle nearer to its goal. 'If Religion is a chariot, it looks as if the wheels on which it mounts towards Heaven may be the progressive downfalls of civilisations on Earth'. These

three theories of history clearly both derive from and lead to three different attitudes to life in general. The Positivist conduces to that strange kind of inverted Confucianism which is the worship of one's grandchildren, the Spenglerite to a feeling that the hourglass of time is about to turn with no power at hand to reverse the instrument, the Toynbeesque to a half-despairing, half-hopeful sense of being in a leaky boat on a rough sea in a dark night sailing towards a known but distant shore. The first tends to be the result of a near Cartesian faith in the knowability of the world by human reason, the second of an opposite faith that no theoretical explanation of reality is ever final, the third of that trait in Professor Toynbee's character which believes in 'Reunion all Round; or Jael's Hammer laid Aside and the Milk of Human Kindness Beaten up into Butter and served in a Lordly Dish'. Despite their differences, they have been lumped together as Radical because they are all based on a dynamic picture of the past; the factor of change in history is felt by them to be more important than that of enduring stability and order.

#### THE CONSERVATIVE THEORY OF HISTORY

There are three forms of the sense of the past which can be easily distinguished and between which the student of history has to choose. Should he feel, like Sir Winston Churchill, that the most important aspects of the past are its archetypal stories with the patriotic innuendoes they provide? Should he, like the Radicals, be struck, above all, by the irreversible process of change? If so, should he see in the long story of the defeats and failures of all human attempts to find fixity in things, a progressive and increasingly successful effort to pierce the changing flux of appearances and reach a world of immutable essences in which Truth and stability reside? Or should he enlist with the band of mournful dirgers shedding melancholy tears over the disappearance of what has gone before and the certainty of being overtaken by the same fate themselves? Need the sense of the past take the shape of either a dim remembrance of disconnected series of haphazard events, or a triumphant faith in the future which is only the inexorable working out of the laws of progress embedded in the past, or the feeling of checkmate and shipwreck, that modern man, like a bird with a broken pinion, cannot again soar to the heavens, that is most characteristic of our day? All these theories, I think, are based on a logical confusion between different levels of language; they are three hybrid fusions of science and metaphysics. By the disjunction of the two levels, by distinguishing between two senses of history, the first obtainable by an empirical study of the facts and the other following an act of faith, I think it will be possible to avoid the

difficulties that the second interpretation otherwise involves. But the conservative theory, I shall now try to show later on, rests completely on an Aristotelean picture of reality; it turns history, as Burkhardt confessed, into a 'last religion' and tradition and continuity into fetishes, impregnated with a religious significance that cannot be exorcised. However, the mythical sense of the past has much superficial charm and at first it is the reasons for its attractiveness that I shall expound. The Poets, as Alexander the Great's tutor surely realised when he depreciated history in their favour, have doubtless always conveyed a deeper feeling about the past than the academic historians; for one thing, they take us back so much farther. People have always been interested in wars and love-affairs; they have always told stories about their forbears and these have been handed down, undergoing constant sea changes, from generation to generation. Historians, however, especially since Ranke, only begin to talk confidently of the past when it gets beyond the stage of myth and perhaps even of moralized chronicle. The historian feels that he cannot place too much reliance on those imaginative story-tellers of long ago, who did not need much audience reaction research to discover which tales thrilled or tickled their public, and whose dramatic sense would not, in any case, have allowed them to detract one iota of interest from their many-times-told tales by too strict an adherence to truth. The historian further extends his doubts also to those classical and medieval chroniclers who did have some respect for the sanctity of facts; they did not invent them to adorn a tale, but used them declaredly as a concrete exposition of their philosophy. Not only do Herodotus and Livy, gossip writers and rhetoricians, fall under the suspicion of critical and incredulous historians, who hold that stringent scientific principles should guide one's reconstructions of the past, but also Thucydides and Tacitus, who had a tendency to dramatise facts to exemplify such doctrines as that hubris is followed by a fall. The Rankist disciple tells us that belief is at least to be suspended till further corroboration is obtained from inscriptions, topography, potsherds, fragments and remains. Fairly certainly, the conservative feels, these will bring to light some obvious or apparent discrepancies, and from them the historian will in all likelihood claim to reconstruct what *really* took place. If his conjectures be ingenious, he will cover himself with glory and decorations, or at least earn an academic reputation for distinguished research: but it does not do much to help towards the derivation of ethical lessons. The conservative does not disapprove of the historian's researching; history is superior to a Dostoevski novel as a source book for ethics because the public is more impressed by things that really happened than by fiction; the public must, therefore,

have confidence that what the historian is saying is the truth. But for the conservative, the historian's function as researcher is clearly subsidiary to his function as teacher. Lord Acton, therefore, commits the sin of finickiness when for him St. Bede and Matthew Paris hardly qualify as worthy sources since medieval writers, he explains, 'lived in the twilight of fiction', whereas, 'the deeds of history' are 'done in the daylight'. Their documentation is chaste and uncoloured; they had no desire to demonstrate a thesis, but they 'lived under a cloud of false witnesses' and their believing habits were too lax. Such a frame of mind does not constrict the poet's spinning of his story; he is free to take us back to the days when goddesses and mortals had love-affairs and the doings of their children created such commotion in the heavens. These stories are not only beautiful in themselves, but they give us a stronger sense of national identity than the frequently funereal parade of yawn-enforcing facts of the academic historian. This national self-consciousness is, for all true Aristotelean conservatives, the chief mark of a country's having a spiritually vitaminous sense of the fatherland's past.

Then it is easy to pour cheap satire on the heads of the German scholars piecing shreds of evidence together and the American post-graduate researchers painfully accumulating data for doctoral dissertations; who kill the fatted calf with joy when they discover some new detail which had escaped the less microscopic eyes of their predecessors and are thus enabled to hazard the guess, for instance, that the original of 'the cat which could look at a king' was the domestic pet of Hieronymous Resch whom the emperor Maximilian visited in 1517, or to conjure up with Chesterton the traditional caricature of the absent-minded professor gazing at a Roman coin while an escaped elephant pokes its head through the skylight. And doubtless it is true that though this concentrated research provides the bricks out of which the edifice will later emerge, a real sense of the past cannot be built after the fashion of the slaves constructing the pyramids. Some time a call has to be made on the imagination. By itself the raw material is either too scanty or too full. For the earlier stages of man's history, the historian has to resort to daring speculation and conjecture to fill up the picture, only parts of which are backed by evidence often barely retrieved from darkness, for the later stages a glut of facts is available thanks to the scholarly army which has raised the dust in all the libraries of the world, garnering knowledge about all aspects of human achievement from weapons of war to needlework. Where before the danger was drought, now it is drowning, but the historian's difficulty is the same. If the mind has, in Newman's words, to read through the data to the intelligible unity which binds them together or to see the design in

the varying signs of its presence, the conservative knows how often it will happen that a scholar will labour with infinite patience and care, but will, in the end, hazard a gigantic leap. And then a Sir James Frazer will need a watchdog like Andrew Lang to bend the Golden Bough back into a recognisable shape. Therefore he thinks the whole tricky business of discovering designs had better be given up as a bad job; he tends to adopt Herodotus as his patron saint and model and the Burkhardtian dictum that history consists solely of rescuing the outstanding facts from oblivion, as his motto. The past becomes a fortuitous concourse of atomistic events each being so infinitely complex that, if all its features are examined in sufficient detail, it turns out to be utterly unique. Historical events are clearly not simple instances of a universal law; therefore away with all generalisations!

#### A CRITICISM OF THE CONSERVATIVE THEORY OF HISTORY

No historical writing can be done without generalisations. No more than one could list all the supposed atomic propositions of science can one construct a universal history that would furnish a complete compendium of all the specific events that have happened since the beginning of the world. No one could indeed write a complete autobiography if one wished to embalm every fleeting happening that occurred within however brief a lifetime; James Joyce had to be content with a day and Virginia Woolf with a few hours of an afternoon. Not even H.G. Wells hoped to rival that favourite character of old-fashioned preachers, the Recording Angel, the celestial bureaucrat who jots down in his insubstantial log-books our secret thoughts and desires in readiness to present them as incontrovertible evidence against us when his colleague of the Heavenly Civil Service will blow the Last Trumpet. What the historian does is try to make as intelligent a precis as possible of such snippets of this material as are available to him. This, as Mr. McIver has pointed out, is not to depreciate the work of the historian. The function of the Recording Angel could, after all, in a fully mechanised heaven, be performed by an electronic machine, but the historian's precis requires more than a modicum of intelligence. For he has not, as the conservatives suggest, merely to copy out a set of suitable extracts, omitting irrelevancies; but he has to summarise a complete, if necessarily small, section of the Recording Angel's hypothetical book. Though the book would itself fulfil the conservative's dream since it contains absolutely no generalisations or disposition-statements but only specific and concrete occurrences, if the historian has to make his artistic summary, he cannot choose but generalise. Moreover his conclusions do not rest on a direct survey of the facts

for he has, of course, only the evidence of their past happening at his disposal, often defective, at times not even highly circumstantial, evidence that no law-court would accept as conclusive. Nonetheless, what we expect of him is the construction of as complete a picture of the past as possible by a bold interpretation of these few dubious clues. History does not result from a bare catalogue of events, but from the linking of them into a significant connected account. Hence historical judgements are classified as valid or invalid, just or unjust, but rarely as true or false. Because historical events are 'unique', it clearly does not follow any more than because every woman's face is unique, that no generalisations about them are in fact possible.

If this thesis, however, had been true, it would have proved fatal to the use of history the conservative wishes to make. If he is to draw from historical events lessons of correct behaviour, it is not enough for him to stretch the facts out like the early Wittgenstein's open chain of scientific propositions each of which described an atomic fact with no hierarchy among them; he has to assert that they share something, perhaps some mystical 'form', in common! The conservative is not really escaping the feared fallacy of repeated patterns of events; he is denying, perhaps that whole cycles of civilisation re-occur, but not that some historical situations have sufficient features in common to make possible generalisations about the type of human behaviour required to meet them adequately. The hidden postulate is really as blatant as Polonius moving behind Gertrude's arras; the conservatives have a mental picture of an unchanging reality: a steadfast human nature and an immutable order of things that persists through all change. A Christian, like Professor Butterfield, tells us that 'all epochs are equidistant from eternity'; but it is at bottom the Herodotean view that 'history' as Dr. Lowith states it, 'is regulated by a cosmic law of compensation mainly through nemesis which, time and again, restores the equilibrium of the historico-natural forces'. The overtones of economics in Lowith's language have a particular fitness here since this teleological picture of a universe whose balance is self-redressing lies behind the entire conservative temper. The static historical theory is just as false, I hold, as the static model of Adam Smith's classical economics. The conservative, like the Greeks, tends to believe that to think of the past in terms of progress represents an almost irreligious defiance of cosmic order and fate. This Herodotean belief becomes still more explicit in Thucydides. History does not change, for since man is as he always was, and will be, events that happened in the past, 'will happen again in the same or in a similar way'. Nothing really new can occur, when it is 'the nature of all things to grow and to decay'. The



Greeks handed down this doctrine to the Romans. Polybius cites Scipio's dictum after the destruction of Carthage that the same doom will fall on Rome; later he declares that history teaches 'what is best at every time and in every circumstance'. The conservative historian, however strenuous his protestations to the contrary may be, has his sense of the past deeply pockmarked by the classical cyclicism which fits in so well with the belief in the clockwork harmonies of the entire universe.

Besides, the conservative emphasis on the past enduring in the present has a distinct resemblance to Collingwood's slogan 'that all history is contemporary history'. Collingwood, following Croce, held the odd view that the history of the Peloponnesian War, for instance, was 'a mode of experience' – not referring however, as one would suppose, to the 'experience of thousands of poor devils two dozen centuries ago', but to the historian's own private experience in his Oxbridge study. This theory derives its slight semblance of plausibility from the fact that the historian's selection of facts for study is largely conditioned by contemporary interests and that to develop a real sense of the past, he has to have a degree of imaginative sympathy with it. A historian of the Middle Ages must obviously have an outlook on the Catholic Church, neither jaundiced like Dr. Coulton's nor purpled like Belloc's, nor even impossibly detached, but genuinely disposed to sympathy. If one is to understand what it really was to go on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, one must understand the purpose and meaning it had for the pilgrims. But from this truism, Collingwood deduced that 'all history is the history of thought' and that if the historian succeeded in rethinking the thoughts of those whose history he was studying, he had obtained the sense of the past. Thinking yourself into the skin of the chief actors in a historical drama is an old and valued technique for the historian, but driven beyond limits it becomes highly hazardous. The travesties of history that have resulted from picturing the fourth century Greeks as nineteenth-century Whigs, and the talk of France as 'the eternal enemy of mankind', which have, at times, resulted from reading the past too exclusively in terms of the present, have been brought too clearly into the light by twentieth century historians to deserve dwelling upon. Apart from its idealist metaphysics, the Collingwood thesis to be valid universally even as a technique requires the same presuppositions that lie behind the Conservative sense of the past: History is turned into a Platonic Heaven containing the models of which our actions are mediocre imitations.

But from a Platonic heaven, it is both easy and usual for the past to degenerate into a junk-shop full of the china-jug and broken statue and old clock collections which amuse the eccentric, an exotic garden to be

pottered about in and tentatively explored by the old and curious. History acquires all the charms of escapism; it becomes the refuge of all those who wish to flee from the unlovely present into the dreamworld of the 'good old times', to abandon the familiar, humdrum every day world and seek the horizons of a strange and hidden wonderland. The reading of history can beget for the old a pleasure similar to that which space-travel fiction provides for the very young: it takes them on a journey to a lost and distant continent with people similar, but in many ways different and superior to the men we meet in the streets of our cities: only, quite fittingly given their age group, some choose to travel forward in time, others backwards. Utopia can be placed at either end of the time process. But is this, then, all that historians are? Dreaming Alices checking dates instead of chasing white rabbits in the subterranean regions of the imagination? If one wants a different and more serious picture of the historian's activity, one has to turn to that school of historians whom I have labelled 'Radical'.

#### THE RADICAL THEORY OF HISTORY

For us living today it has become difficult to imagine how even the greatest minds among men till less than two centuries ago could think that the past went back only six or eight millennia. After glimpsing the vast, indeed the almost boundless, perspectives of time opened by modern science, to be hemmed in within this narrow space of time produces in us a feeling like asphyxia. But it is still more suffocating to think that it was imagined that throughout this time no progress at all had taken place. For us, it is difficult to get back into the pre-evolutionary frame of mind and conjure up before the mind's eye the static picture of history. Its lifelessness makes it too dull and abhorrent for us to bear its contemplation: everything repeating itself ceaselessly without variation or change of key. The boredom of it! 'Having climbed on to the shoulders of the ancients', said Fontanelle, 'we see further than they'. And Pascal added more profoundly that the successive generations of mankind can be regarded as the extension of a single man, always alive and learning. Therefore, I certainly think that the past has to be interpreted as a unified process of change, and not as a series of static pictures succeeding one another. But I do not think that only one such 'dynamic' interpretation is correct and final, but that several such interpretations can all be simultaneously correct. The trouble with most radical theories of the past, progressive and cyclical, is that, if their desired conclusions are to be reached, they are forced to adopt an a priori, metaphysical approach. They too, offer us deductive arguments of the type: such-and-such is the nature of

things, therefore history must develop in such-and-such a way. They claim to have discovered the open sesame to the world of hidden essences, and, in virtue of this discovery, they forecast the definitive shape of the future. But there is a second mode of approach open to the would-be philosopher of history. The arguments to be advanced in support of his theories would be of a less pretentious, inductive sort. Past history has developed in these ways; provided no new factor, uncalculated though not necessarily incalculable, intervenes, as it well might, these and these events are likely to happen. While the metaphysical approach requires that a theory be advanced as absolutely certain and that its predictions should prove incapable of falsification, this empirical approach can easily allow, because of its inductive nature, the possibility of its explanations being subsumed within other explanations of a higher level of generality or being advanced as merely probable because of the deficiency of evidence and the infant stage of our knowledge of psychology and even of being falsified by the unforeseen intervention of other factors. Such theories would only be advanced as working hypotheses, as the application of a certain conceptual apparatus to explain the past in terms of a model like those used in scientific theories. The test of such a model would be its experimental use. By considering some historical happening in its light, did one succeed or not in explaining it? Such a model clearly need not be advanced as the only possible one; in fact it is fairly obvious that as one moved from one level of generality to another, the model would have to be different, just as in physics at Newton's level of generality a certain model is suitable, but at Einstein's, which treats Newton's as a particular case, a different model becomes necessary. Thus, a theory like the Marxist, which attempts to explain the broad transformations of society from epoch to epoch in terms of changes in the methods of economic productions cannot, without a disastrous confusion of levels, be applied to explain why Smith voted for the Tory party at the last bye-election. Truth at the class level may be falsehood at the personal.

Further, I think that even at the same level of historical generality, different models can be used to convey the sense of the past. One can find parallels in history for certain distinctions Wittgenstein makes with regard to perception. First, to take the process negatively, one can fail to be aware of something because of a defective sense-organ, say, deafness; this would correspond to not possessing the facts in history. Secondly, one could be unaware of something because of, so to say, a deafness in the understanding rather than in the hearing. For instance, because of the lack of a musical ear, one can fail to recognise the theme of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. This would correspond to a failure to perceive the

causal connections between different events. So far any divergencies of view between historians would be purely factual and could be settled by empirical tests. But, thirdly, there is, in Wittgenstein's language, a failure to be aware of something that is not factual but interpretative, which he calls 'aspect-blindness'. One discerns the theme enunciated in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, but it does not suggest 'Fate knocking at the door', or whatever it is supposed to suggest. Wittgenstein discusses several different kinds of aspect to which one could be 'blind', the most complex of which he calls 'the aspect of organisation'. This aspect changes, he says, 'as parts of the picture go together which before did not'. History is clearly a case where this can be applied: the rhapsody may then turn out to be a fugue.

Wittgenstein adds to the last remark, another: 'The substratum of this experience is the mastery of a technique'. By this he means that it is a necessary logical condition for seeing the organisational aspect of some reality that one has learnt the meaning of the conceptual apparatus one is going to apply, and the know-how of applying it. The historian, for instance, must approach his material, (though not necessarily already armed with his hypothesis), at least able to entertain the concept of the hypothesis and to apply it when it is formed. Otherwise he will simply fail to see the meaning of what he is studying; the sense of the past will never strike him. The matter is further complicated in history because there can be no historian who does not suffer in his field the equivalent of a defective sense-organ in a music critic; he must notice the theme and be struck by its meaning when he can only hear fragments, small or large, of the symphony. Hence there is a greater danger for a historical hypothesis to be falsified than for a scientific one; a historical model may turn out far more easily to be inappropriate than a scientific model. Because of this practical factor, historical theories that are advanced not as metaphysical disclosures of the hidden inner fabric of reality, but as empirical hypotheses, cannot be considered ultimate or definitive. What Burns Singer says of modern poetry, even if perhaps not always true of poetry, is certainly true of history: 'With a modern poem, even with a simple one, it will hang together in several ways, and so form several different patterns, and none of these patterns is better or more right than the others. And since you can never be sure that there is not yet another undiscovered pattern, you can never be sure that there is not a better pattern than any you have discovered'.

Yet another reason for declining to state with the radicals, optimists or pessimists, that there is only one authentic sense of the past is precisely the fact that history is not comparable to static sciences like

chemistry of the classical economics of Adam Smith, but to dynamic studies like the economic theories of growth, where allowance has to be made for the effect which a knowledge of these patterns of development has on people's subsequent conduct. This does not only make the task of prophesy on the basis of the past hazardous, but also means that no sense of the past can be considered ultimate. For does not the occurrence of each event new alter our whole understanding of the relationships between past events themselves? A striking parallel can again be found in literature, if Eliot's critical thesis is accepted that with every new addition to literature the relationships between all the old masterpieces are subtly readjusted, just as the relationships between members of a family are altered by the birth of a baby. If every generation must reclassify the great works of literature anew in order to reassess their place in tradition, likewise it is true that every new generation must rewrite the history books. The sense of the past will, therefore, differ in every age quite apart from the discoveries of new facts that are constantly being made.

Sir Lewis Namier was, I think, right when he suggested that all that the sense of the past really consisted in was the ability to place what did happen in the context of what could have happened. Since as the historical perspective enlarges, so this context widens, it follows that our sense of the past should constantly alter. A knowledge of the past does not show what determined the present, but what made it possible for it to take the shape it actually took: the present is inexplicable without it but is not a mere explication of it. The conclusion, therefore, is that the sense of the past is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of our understanding of the present. Such historical theories as I am defending could only claim, hence, to be pointers but not proofs of what the future is likely to be like. Though a study of history so conceived cannot claim to lead to the moral betterment of its students, it does not deserve the Senecan diatribe, later eloquently echoed by Paul Valery, to the effect that it is a useless and debasing practice. To the Radical, who wishes to alter society, not to conform with the inevitable laws of history, but because he desires a different and better type of society, the sense of the past is a help towards understanding how present values came to be established. Creative action is hedged about by hundreds of conservative impediments that refuse to be brushed aside until the causes which have produced and sustained them are shown to be outmoded and invalid. The task of altering a tradition will then be seen to involve a process by which new functional values must first emerge before new ways of life can be made to supplant the old. For such Radicals therefore history is

interesting not for its isolated events but as a continuous closely-knit, developing process, because it is fruitful only by disclosing the origins and formation of the present world. Hence detailed accuracy is highly important for the Radicals, though next to negligible for the conservative so far as the political use of history is concerned.

#### THE CHRISTIAN THEORY OF HISTORY

Non-metaphysical historical theories, whatever their use, as Marx realised, by themselves will never lead to action since they can establish no values. Empirical investigation by itself provides no solution to the 'ultimate' questions. Like Wittgenstein, 'We feel that if all possible scientific questions were answered, the problems of life would still not have been touched upon. No Marxist would accept the disentangling of his metaphysical beliefs from his empirical analysis of the facts; he could not tolerate the use of his historical theory purely as a working hypothesis, possibly fallible, that could be helpful to historians in explaining the past. If the conservative theory is unpalatable today because modern man has known too many changes still to believe in an underlying stratum of permanent things, the great charm of the Marxist theory was its derivation from Hegel of the 'algebra of revolution'. By a dizzying confusion between his economic analysis of facts and his vastly comprehensive value-judgements, Marx created a picture of the world that, while claiming to be based on strictly empirical evidence, still attempted to disclose the hidden nature of the processes that lay at the heart of reality and to answer the 'ultimate questions'. Like the Conservative, he turned history into a God-like teacher of ethics.

If the past is, however, liable to be interpreted at two levels, these should be distinguished, since theories at different levels of language require different logical support. The first level of interpretation is that sought by means of theoretical models depending for their devising on the professional labours of the historian. The facts of the past are studied and perhaps a total explanation is attempted in terms of an empirically falsifiable hypothesis whose validity lies in its usefulness to explain. The second level is the metaphysical level of interpretation which, I do not think, is in principle impossible, but which involves an act of faith: it is a total vision of things which deals with historical happenings of an order which is not empirical but supernatural. Such a theory would require to be established or disproved on its own merits, but I do not think it could be a purely secular interpretation of the past. The Apostles of Progress from Voltaire to Comte and Condorcet not only inherited the logical confusion of the Christian Providentialist theory of Bossuet, but

further blurred the distinction, for while the latter was at least openly interpreting the natural in terms of the supernatural, the empirical in terms of the transcendental, the latter denied that there were two orders of concepts being handled, though clearly terms like 'Progress' were being used as disguises for mysterious, transcendental entities. Before Christianity, in fact, no philosopher had asked whether history had a meaning. As Plato might have said, historiography dealt with the sphere of change and contingency, but timeless and general truths were the province of philosophy. Yet while for Herodotus, to think of history as a march would have been to violate the rational and self-sufficient order of the cosmos, his near contemporary, Isaias, was interpreting the vicissitudes of the Jewish people in terms of a divine plan. For the Jewish prophets – the first radical historians – as Voltaire remarked: 'If a King names Cyrus becomes the master of Babylon, it is so that a few Jews shall be allowed to go home. If Alexander is victorious over Darius, it is in order to establish some Jewish second hand dealers in Alexandria'. But if Christians have to believe that Jewish history till the Incarnation can be given this joint politico-theological interpretation in the light of the covenant between God and his chosen people, Bossuet was, even if Christianity is accepted, wrong to apply the same method over every other field of human history. Christians do not claim to be an 'elected' people like the Jews, and the history of salvation is no longer linked to the history of a particular nation. No detailed correlation can any longer be established between the happenings of secular history and the divine plan of salvation. But the temptation to do it is still great. Like Eusebius of Caesarea who held that Providence had used the Imperium Romanum to pave the way for Constantine's Empire and Bossuet, who tried to interpret the history of civilisations as a Providential movement towards the establishment of Christendom, Professor Toynbee today, (though he fiercely denounces Bossuet) tells us that the downfalls of successive civilisations have the historical function of acting 'as stepping stones to a progressive process of the revelation of always deeper religious insight'. Once he held that the technological unification of the world 'may serve its historical purpose by providing Christianity with a world-wide repetition of the Roman Empire to spread itself over'; today he tends to substitute a syncretist fusion of the four great living religions for Christianity. There is clearly no support for this thesis in Christian Revelation at all. Besides it is a highly dangerous doctrine when statesmen or philosophers try to make religion and empire subservient to each other. When the destinies of nations become related to a pseudo-divine vocation and their leaders begin to talk about the historic mission of their country, then the Jews being to be

packed off to gas chambers and the white man bends to lift his burden. At best such a frame of mind leads to remarks like De Tocqueville's that to fight democracy is 'to be fighting against God Himself'.

Sacred history is no more a key to empirical history than Marxist metaphysics. The histories of the *Civitas Dei* and the *Civitas Terrena* takes place, as Augustine realized, on two different levels. The vision of the past disclosed by the Bible – though it does not dispense us from an empirical examination of the events claimed to be historical – presupposes a belief in supernatural events, the *magnalia Dei* which by themselves constitute sacred history. The growth and decline of nations, the rise and fall of empires, the evolution of the means of economic production, the progress or regress of science and civilisation do not follow the same chart of development as the Kingdom of God. The *Weltgeschichte* and the *Heilsgeschichte* are different stories though they have definite points of contacts. The latter is a vision which encompasses all time, beginning with the Creation of the World, through God's choice of Israel, till the Incarnation. The advent of Christ is, however, not an outstanding fact among others, but a unique and unrepeatable event, an act of Redemption and resurrection in a history of sin and death. Since then the history of the Kingdom of God continues invisibly in the Church, viewed as a supernatural Body. The decisive battle against Satan has been won by the Redeemer, but, as Oscar Cullman put it, V-Day has not yet been proclaimed. Therefore Christians live in this period awaiting the Parousis, and the fulfilment of time. But even if one accepts as valid this theological sense of the past, one has still to distinguish it from the empirical. No historian, *qua* historian, can recognise Christ to be the Son of God. Seen in the framework of secular history He is only the founder of a flourishing religious sect. But if by an act of faith, He is acknowledged as the *Kyrios Christos*, the Lord of history, a new dimension is then added to one's sense of the past. Though by empirical methods, all that can be done is the construction of doubtful hypotheses that give at best grounds for fallible expectations that something will probably happen, or perhaps, as psychology gets beyond its infact stage and the universe becomes increasingly manageable, for quasiscientific prediction, the Christian sense of the past, rejecting the stoic maxim, *nec spe, nec metu*, holds out the promise of a triumphant end. Marxists are apt to treat those as if they were displaying an unbearable puerility of mind who ask them why once the classless society is ushered in by that universal Sicilian Vespers when the expropriators will be expropriated, the dialectical principle, if it is the heart-beat of reality, should cease its production of contradictions but I think the difficulty is not only respectable but quite un-



answerable. The end of the historical process can only mean the end of the world. Secular Messianism is an illogical hybrid between Faith and Scepticism. But if history is the anvil on which God is beating out His purposes, then, as Lowith puts it, 'the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse, demonstrating the past as a meaningful preparation for the future'. For though the two senses of the past, sacred and secular, are disparate, this does not mean that there is no interplay between the two. If Christ was born of the Virgin Mary and suffered under Pontius Pilate then the whole texture of human history has become blessed. Burkhardt in telling us of his admiration for those early Christians who in the decaying days of the Roman Empire became 'heroes of the desert' and whose extreme example he himself tried to imitate (with Victorian moderation), showed a typical cultured agnostic's misunderstanding when he said that their Christian sense of the past had dictated their 'abandonment' of the world. For believers, however decadent and sinful the world may look, it can never deserve to be abandoned once Christ has paid for its Redemption with his blood; nor can the Christian be indifferent to the history of the world that deserved such a costly ransom. The tale of the past will still be for him a tale of suffering and sorrow, but the 'sublimity of history' is not, as for Spengler, 'its purposelessness'. By his life and death Christ has given it a purpose, and humanity a pledge of final victory. 'Man began to suffer in Hope and this is what we call the Christian era'.