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Who Are We? Then Shall The Dust Return, by Julian Green.

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BOOKS

WHO ARE WE?

THEN SHALL THE DUST RETURN, by Julian Green. New York: Harper. \$2.50.

"No date—Deep within me there is silence. I looked at myself yesterday in the mirror between the windows in the drawing room. My face is like thousands of other human faces, with the features that life, heredity, and passion have fashioned as they pleased. All that is accidental, but the look of mute interrogation is eternal, unvarying, as old as the world itself: *who are we?*"

It is one of the leading characters in Julian Green's most recent novel who thus meditates in her diary. Very similar sentences could be quoted out of Green's own journal; they express, indeed, the very essence of his entire work—the intrinsic quality of his writing.

He seems to be constantly perturbed, haunted, tormented and inspired by the problem of his own identity, which involves the enigmatic relation of his individual drama to the collective drama of man and also the relation of both the individual and the collective organism to the unfathomable and unquestionable existence of God. There has been in this century perhaps only one author whose concern with these basic religious and philosophical matters was even more profound, more passionate and more painful—Franz Kafka. And there is only one contemporary writer who is still more daring and more conscientious than Julian Green in scrutinizing and defining the riddles and contradictions of his own internal self—André Gide.

In fact, the place of Julian Green in modern literature is somewhere between these two extraordinary minds—Gide and Kafka. The American who was educated in France and writes in the most lucid and rhythmic French, seems to be strangely akin to that incredible Jew from Prague, who has been called "the secret king of modern German prose." Both Green and Kafka are obsessed by the idea of Original Sin, as both are homeless, disconnected, and, therefore, immune from the false feeling of security inherent in every gregarious form of life. Only he who has shaken off the specious bonds of family and nation is in a position to grasp the utter isolation of man and, at the same time, his mysterious community with unknown forces.

Undeniably, Kafka is more of a maniac and definitely more of a genius than either Green or Gide. Also Gide surpasses Green as a creative thinker, a sovereign and comprehensive mind. If it is true that Green is Kafka's more fragile and less tragic brother—both being visionaries, both harassed and elated by a fixed idea—it is true as well that he is the most responsive and most original disciple of André Gide. A book like Green's *Personal Record* is hardly thinkable without Gide's stimulating influence. In fact, the traces of Gide's intellectual authority are, sometimes, easier to recognize than the identity of the observant traveler who has jotted down these vivid, colorful notes—and the saturnine narrator of so much gloom, solitude and frustration.

Julian Green's early novels—*Adrienne Mesurat* and *Léviathan*—seem to be written by an elderly man who has spent many a monotonous year in the stifling confines of a provincial little town. Whence comes this un-

canny insight into the petty desires and appalling crimes of a sinister world so remote from his own background? What mysterious power is it that forced him, mercilessly, to transform his own experience into the macabre images of this dusty inferno? I shall never forget the casualness with which Julian Green once observed to me: "It's not I who produces my novels. Somebody else moves my hand. . . ." I am positive that he did not lie. Yet he was truthful as well when he noted in his diary while he was working on *Léviathan* in 1928: "*Page 178 de mon roman. Voici la vérité sur ce livre: je suis tous les personnages. . .*"

How unfathomable is the abyss of the human unconscious! It contains treasures as well as monstrosities—sacred arch-types, sinister taboos, forgotten agonies, superstitions and revelations. "Whence come the fears of a child in a dark room if not from the terror of his earliest ancestors at the entrance of a dark cavern?" This is one of the questions Green asks in the Foreword to his new novel, *Then Shall the Dust Return*. This brief preface is a little masterpiece in itself, outlining in the most concise and penetrating manner the basic idea of the book. Obviously enough, Green's concept of the "ancestral memory"—his notion of the "collective unconscious"—is influenced, if not determined, by the doctrines of J. H. Jung. (Certain diary notes with regard to a lecture by Dr. Jung which Green attended in Paris, seem to confirm this statement.) At the same time, however, Green's interpretation of human life as something that is "almost always incomplete in itself . . . like an undecipherable portion of a long message," is deeply rooted in very personal and intimate experiences. Jung's theories

did not provoke, but only clarified, certain trance-like intuitions which Green reports in his diary. The sight of an antique garment—a mantle of the bronze age displayed in a Swedish museum—stimulated his imagination. The following sentences testify to the profound impression this relic made on his responsive and delicate mind:

"I had a strange sensation before these relics of an age so distant, the sensation that all of humanity was passing through me as though on a great route. It was all part of me and I was all part of it. I lived the day when humanity raised its eyes to the clouds for the first time and I will be there at the end, if there is an end. I cannot die. Its heart is my heart and this heart has only begun to beat. That which I call life is nothing more than the awareness which humanity has of itself."

This is precisely the mood out of which this mystic saga was born, the epic phantasy whose original title is *Varouna*. According to Green's explanation, Varouna is, in Vedic mythology, "the nocturnal sky; he surrounds, he encloses, he restrains, he unites. . . . His place among the gods is the most splendid of all. He knows man's every action, even the most secret, and the darkest night cannot hinder the watchfulness of his countless spies, the stars."

The novel is composed like a symphony in three movements, with the preface suggesting the leading themes. The *leitmotiv* connecting the individual tunes of this extensive and complex musical organism is a chain—an occult token: "the sign and, as it were, the witness to two destinies which were to proceed side by side and be infallibly united in the end."

It is a story of human beings attracting and missing each other through the centuries; reborn in succeeding epochs, till they find and recognize and love each other. It is a story of transmigration, although Green tells us that he is "not sure" that transmigration is involved. It is, perhaps, simply the story "of a man and a woman who find within themselves the fragments of a forgotten heritage: the words, the cries, and the gestures of past generations. . . ."

The prelude dies away with a solemn cadence charged with mystery. Then the curtain rises: the grand operatic performance begins. The opening chords are of a majestic simplicity—powerful and epic, very Wagner-like. So is the scenery—the wild, rocky coast of Wales. Even the adolescent hero has Wagnerian features—Hoël, a savage youth, running along the beach with his lantern. "Hoël found the chain one winter's evening. . . . The wave which deposited the metal links at the child's feet was like a great black hand."

Thus the truculent boy is admitted to the weird community of those who are selected or cursed to possess the magic chain. In his dreams he makes the acquaintance of his predecessors, the former members of the chain-organization. Will young Hoël's fate be as sinister as theirs was? Most of them perished in gruesome fashion. Is the chain, then, the bearer of an inexorable doom? Hoël gives the fatal token back to the sea—in vain: he is already involved in the inevitable spell. Why did he have to die on the gallows, a miserable sinner, full of repentance and bewilderment? Because he murdered Morgane, the beautiful girl, cutting her throat "with one lash of his knife." Did he commit this crime really because of the jewel that

he thought was in the girl's possession? No, it was by no means an imaginary jewel that allured and ruined him. "He was amazed when he saw something that seemed to be wriggling in the blood from the wound like a serpent in water; it was a chain. He took hold of it, and his hands began to tremble, for he knew the chain well. . . ."

Is Bertrand Lombard, a French citizen living in the middle of the sixteenth century, a reincarnation of Hoël, the pagan boy who finally learned to pray: "*Our Father . . .*" The extraneous circumstances of their biographies differ from each other in almost every detail. Bertrand Lombard is a settled man—a patrician, dignified, pensive, stricken with sorrow over the loss of his beloved wife, perplexed and tormented, finally destroyed, by his sacrilegious passion for Helene, his daughter. It is Helene, not her father and lover, who receives the chain and bears it around her neck: a man with a canvas bag full of goods to sell presents her with the token of destiny. "'Will you accept this?' he asked, holding out the chain; then, in a whisper: 'It is a gift from the men of the sea.'"

"It has come to me after passing through many hands," Helene understands. "It has been covered with earth and it has been soaked with blood. Like the destiny of mankind it has neither beginning nor end." And her father feels that "those curiously interwoven links bind Helene and me to something beyond memory." What he fails to grasp, though he feels it as well, is the even more frightening and mysterious fact that, through the magic medium of the age-old chain, he is also connected with Hoël and all those in whose possession the symbol had been before: nay, he *is* Hoël, the

child in ragged clothes standing upon a wave-beaten rock on the seashore.

It must have been a very strange sort of "peace" Bertrand Lombard experienced when he found himself transported "to many places where he was certain he had never been before." However, destiny had the same spiritual experience in store for a woman called Jeanne—the heroine of the third part. Her diary notes begin in 1903 and bring us to the eve of the first World War. Jeanne is a sensitive and rather dreary young woman who busies herself with writing novels and lives in one of those provincial infernos Green describes with so much gusto and skill. But Jeanne is also Helene, who had ended her life as a bride of God as she could not well become the bride of her unhappy father.

Jeanne is working on a novel whose leading character is—Helene. Her reflections and observations with regard to Helene's tragedy are apt to amplify our own knowledge of the Lombard drama. For Jeanne, being the reincarnation of her heroine, is better informed, of course, than anyone else—better even than Julian Green. "We are one person, you and I," exclaims Jeanne to Helene.

The difference is only that Jeanne—or, rather, Helene—*redivivus*—has much better luck this time. The man she loves is not her father. She can marry him, she is happy. In the last scene of the story we see Jeanne and her husband, Louis, strolling through the British Museum; lingering in the department where prehistoric objects are shown; startled by the sight of a chain—a simple chain much less attractive than the others and made of a rougher metal: "but it was so cleverly fashioned that by some inexplicable magic it seemed to be alive."

Yet it is not alive any more: the disastrous spell is broken, as the man and the woman, predestined for each other since the beginning of time, have finally met. Jeanne and Louis gaze at the chain, faintly disturbed by the strangely familiar look of a museum-piece they have never seen before. The chain has lost its power because Jeanne and Louis are happy. In fact, the chain seems a bit pathetic, like a tamed snake in its dignified cage.

Are they *really* so exceedingly happy—the provincial novelist and her rather colorless husband? Frankly I doubt it. We are supposed to accept their happiness as a fact—without questioning. But there is nothing, or very little, to demonstrate this exuberant joy. Throughout the entire book—which means through thousands of years and almost three hundred pages—these two beings have sought and missed each other. The moment of their ultimate union—which is, indeed, the moment of their *salvation*—should be filled with an ecstasy beyond words. It is surprisingly feeble. The happy ending is an anticlimax.

Has Julian Green betrayed the law and meaning of his own message when he attempted to adapt it to the primitive pattern of this fairy tale-like chronicle? His failure to make the moment of supreme fulfilment plausible and impressive, somehow frustrates the entire scheme of his story. If Jeanne and Louis are not really happy, what then is the value and significance of the chain? Jeanne and Louis would have to sing with the voices of Tristan and Isolde to make the symbolism of the chain convincing. The truth is that Louis possesses no voice or face at all—while Jeanne *has* a voice; but it assumes fer-

vor and persuasion only when it laments, not when it is jubilant. Jeanne is at her best, or rather Green is at his best, when she suffers and waits. She is magnificent in her sadness and solitude, with Louis being away. "Louis will be detained in London until the beginning of July," she writes. "That sentence, which would seem commonplace to anyone else, has become for me something like a palace of sorrow where I wander dismally all day long."

Has Julian Green gone astray since he left his palace of sorrow, abandoning the bleak familiarity of its eerie twilight for the sake of a clarity he hoped to find outside? The contact with the wisdom of Dr. Jung and the Vedas has not deepened his wisdom but has weakened it. The scientific discovery of the "collective unconscious" has hindered him in exploring the creative mysteries of his own soul.

When I explain my disappointment with *Then Shall the Dust Return*, I do so not *in spite* of my genuine admiration for Julian Green, but *because* of it. A great writer at his worst is infinitely more interesting than a mediocre writer at his very best. This is so, not only because we have a right to expect fine details and original thought in any work that bears a great writer's name; (and I hasten to add that Green's new novel is, indeed, abundant with poetic images; the texture is rich and sometimes assumes the mellow splendor of fine old tapestry.) What seems to me more important is the secret affinity that must infallibly exist between the solitary tendencies of a creative individual and the collective tendencies of the intellectual world.

It would be a mistake to denounce Julian Green's mystic saga as "escap-

ism." On the contrary, he was very much in keeping with the essential trends of contemporary thinking when he ventured on this bold experiment destined to enrich our knowledge of the human problem. From a purely moral point of view, *Then Shall the Dust Return* undoubtedly marks a considerable step forward. For it represents Green's first attempt to overcome the limitations of his own nightmarish dream-world and to participate in the general process of revising, reaffirming, rejuvenating our vision of man. At this crucial moment in the winning fight against chaotic irrationalism, the imperative task is to reconcile reality and myth, knowledge and divination, science and faith. Green's narrative escapade into the realm of esoteric wisdom is not only a symptom of this general effort, but also a contribution to its final success. True, *Varouna* as a work of art falls short of *Minuit* or *Léviathan*. The poet who found his way with the infallibility of a sleep-walker among the lurid phantoms of his private imagination, seems to hesitate as he tries, for the first time, to change his approach and to expand his experience. In his new novel Julian Green does not ask any more: *Who am I?*—but, in an uncertain, anxious voice: *Who are we?*

The staggering experiences man has passed through during these last years are apt to teach him that he knows very little—that he knows, in fact, almost nothing of the basic rules and aims of his own existence. In view of a rapid disintegration of all common values and laws, he remembers the fundamental solidarity of all human life; that we are all formed of the same substance—guided by one unfathomable will. And while the ne-

farious heresy of race doctrines is on the point of destroying the natural community of men, the most sensitive and most independent minds find each other in the spirit of a new humbleness. Those who have never experienced the intricate delights and agonies of profound scepticism, now have the vulgar audacity to guffaw at the supreme, invisible Being. Their blasphemy in denying God negates the mission of human life. It behooves all of us, who are striving for the improvement of human order, to remember and to renew that child-like invocation, the fragment of a prayer that young Hoël stammered in the hour of his atonement: "Our Father. . . ."

It is hardly more than a whisper—a fervent murmur, almost inarticulate: nothing but a sigh of helplessness and dread and faith. But how it echoes through the centuries!—*Our Father . . . Our Father. . . .*

It is this pious formula, this anxious lisp which connects Hoël with us, and us with the poet whose living dream Hoël is. For we are all created and protected, cherished and destroyed by One eternal energy; the perishable substance of our being has emanated from the inexhaustible source of force, light and love—who will call us back when our time is over.

It is true, then, what Helene Lombard—already bodiless but still continuing her pilgrimage toward the absolute—confides to her mortal sister Jeanne: "My dear Jeanne," she says, "it is much simpler than you seem to think. Discard all these spiritual methods; they will only confuse you. I am going to tell you a secret that I discovered at the end of my novitiate: *Our Father* contains every-

thing; it is the abridgment of Christian doctrine and the essence of God's teaching. Say *Our Father* with real sincerity and you will one day dwell in the promised land."

KLAUS MANN

ART AS STRATEGY

THE PHILOSOPHY OF LITERARY FORM. STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC ACTION, by Kenneth Burke. Louisiana State University Press. \$3.00.

KENNETH BURKE's new book continues his analysis of the nature of linguistic, or symbolic, or literary action begun in *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes toward History*. A collection of essays on various subjects, it lacks a cohesive central theme such as informed *Permanence and Change* and, to a lesser degree, *Attitudes toward History*. For this reason it does not lend itself to a quick or easy summary. The subjects treated range from semantics to *Twelfth Night*, from Freud and the analysis of poetry to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Politics, psychoanalysis, linguistics, economics, neurology—these are but a few of Burke's sources of corroboration. Yet beneath the wide range of material there is a profound concern with the problem or strategy of communication in imaginative and critical writing. Rather than attempt to summarize the individual essays, it will be more useful and rewarding to consider them as integral parts of this larger, unifying purpose.

The long opening treatise, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, defines the theory and method that Burke applies to specific works in later essays. The fifteen sections into which it is divided comprise a searching and far-reaching inquiry into the psychology of the poetic act. A poem, accord-