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Dwight, the Passionate Moralists

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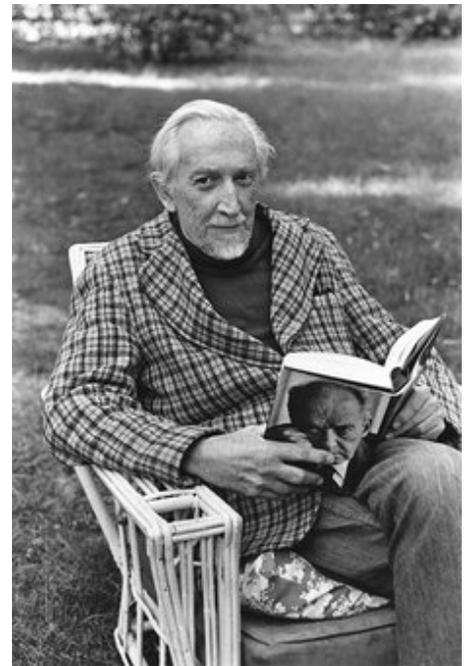
Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain

by Dwight Macdonald, edited by John Summers, with an introduction by Louis Menand
New York Review Books, 291 pp., \$16.95 (paper)

1.

In his long career as a journalist and critic, Dwight Macdonald exasperated his left-wing friends by changing his political views unpredictably and abruptly, sometimes between soup and dessert. He signed a petition favoring one side in a labor dispute, only to join the other side a few days later. He was a Trotskyite; then he was a pacifist; later he was neither. He wrote to a friend: “My own political views for years...have been tentative, contradictory, and deplorably vague.”

His elitist views on literature and art seemed to undercut his populist politics. He despised almost everything in popular culture; some best-selling books are remembered only because he demolished them in a review. At sixty-two, when he joined the protesters at the 1968 campus uprising at Columbia, he lectured to the student rebels on the value of critical standards and high culture. Even his sympathetic biographer, Michael Wreszin, used the title of his 1994 biography—*A Rebel in Defense of Tradition*—to point toward Macdonald’s contradictions and emphasized his “split personality, the agitating activist vs. the incisive cultural critic.” The comments on the cover of *Masscult and Midcult*, John Summers’s new selection of ten of Macdonald’s essays on literature and culture, praise him mostly as a contrarian, provoker, and scourge of mediocrity, memorable less for what he had to say than for having had, as Norman Mailer put it, “the rare gift of always speaking out of his own voice.”



Nancy Crampton

Dwight Macdonald, East Hampton, New York, 1979

Macdonald was a deeper, more decisive, and more coherent thinker than his reputation—or this selection—suggests. He was consistent in his focus on the

moral aspects of books and politics, but in literary essays like these he tended to write about such matters either in passing or in a tone of embarrassment. He gestured toward them in a memorial essay for James Agee in 1957:

Agee, I think, had the technical, the intellectual, and the moral equipment to do major writing. By “moral,” which has a terribly old-fashioned ring, I mean that Agee believed in and—what is rarer—was interested in good and evil. Lots of writers are fascinated by evil and write copiously about it, but they are bored by virtue.... (Character is another old-fashioned quality that interested Agee.)

Macdonald’s greatest achievement was his magazine *Politics* (1944–1949), which had a small circulation and a large impact. Czesław Miłosz later told him that his magazine had had a far greater influence in Europe than he could have guessed from America. A typical issue might include Albert Camus’s refusal to choose between evil alternatives, “Neither Victims nor Executioners,” Bruno Bettelheim’s report from the Nazi concentration camps, “Behavior in Extreme Situations”—the first such account to appear—or Simone Weil’s “The Iliad, or The Poem of Force,” which transformed the modern view of Homer while illuminating both ancient literature and contemporary morality. The same double focus on aesthetics and morals later became Macdonald’s greatest strength as a critic.

Politics differed from all other political magazines by treating politics as a branch of morals. Near the end of its run, Macdonald compiled a “Subject Index” to its back numbers; the first entry was “Political Morality.” He asked the same questions about political values that he asked about aesthetic ones. His magazine was both an urgent commentary on current events and a patient meditation on the deeper ways those events should be judged. In a typical issue the front pages condemned Roosevelt’s indifference to Jewish refugees, and the back pages analyzed the limitations of Marxist ethics as an approach to interpreting history.

The same monthly issue that reported on French elections and strikes by conscientious objectors also printed an essay in which Macdonald explored basic questions about the values he relied on in both his political critiques and his aesthetic ones:

By “value judgment” I mean a statement that involves the notion of “Good” and “Bad” in either an ethical or an esthetic sense.... The “personal feeling” of the observer not only enters into the judgment but is the chief determinant of the judgment. It is impossible, therefore, ever to solve a moral or esthetic problem in the definite way that a scientific problem can be solved....

A few years later he wrote, “I think that the only serious aspect of politics is its relation to art and morality.”

The ten essays in *Masscult and Midcult* display Macdonald’s genius for what he called “the

genres that one would expect our age to excel in, . . . rhetoric and comedy.” The title essay, published in 1960, takes gleeful pleasure in deflating *The Old Man and the Sea* and other earnest, high-sounding books and plays that served an audience who aspired to be intellectual and avant-garde without being either. Unlike mass-produced popular culture, “midcult” —Macdonald’s Soviet-sounding shorthand for middlebrow culture—“pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them.” Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* is an example:

The stage manager is its demiurge. He is the perfect American pragmatist, folksy and relaxed because that’s jest the way things are and if anybuddy hankers to change ’em that’s their right only (pause, business of drawing reflectively on pipe) chances are ’t won’t make a sight of difference (pipe business again) things don’t change much in Grover’s Corners. There is no issue too trivial for him not to take a stand on. “That’s the end of the first act, friends,” he tells the audience. “You can go smoke now”—adding with a touch of genius, “those that smoke.” Don’t do any harm, really, one way or t’other.

Readers who come to this selection without having read Macdonald’s political essays can easily miss his moral point while smiling over his aesthetic one. *Our Town* is not merely artistically defective; it is morally defective. Grover’s Corners can’t be changed by anyone’s choices; no one’s judgment matters, one way or t’other; the height of wisdom is to accept “the way things are.” At the heart of Macdonald’s career as a political journalist was his hatred of passive acceptance, his contempt for any argument that the “lesser evil” should be endured in order to evade the greater one.

By tolerating, among much else, the “lesser evil” of Stalinism in the war against the greater evil of Nazism, the Allies had assured “the triumph of the greater evil in a different form.” At the start of the cold war, “the world, having avoided being hanged by Hitler, is being poisoned by the victors.” Once, when writing about the “lesser evil,” he interrupted his own sentence with a dash followed by an exclamation: “the pages and pages of argumentation I have written exposing the illogic and immorality of this position!”

Near the end of his “Masscult and Midcult” essay Macdonald quotes a long passage from Kierkegaard’s *The Present Age* about what happens when a person becomes a member of that empty phantom, “the public.” He follows the quotation with a single closing sentence: “This is the essence of what I have tried to say.” In other words, Macdonald was writing less about bad art and greedy publishers than about what it means to let oneself disappear into a passive and anonymous public. Reviewers complained that Macdonald didn’t like the masses. What he didn’t like was anyone’s willingness to be submerged into a mass and the culture that profited each time someone sank into it.

These essays are pervaded by Macdonald’s moral sensibility, obscured though this is by the

absence of his explicit statements of it. In the famous review in which he marches through James Gould Cozzens's midcult novel *By Love Possessed*, devastating not only the book but also its almost unanimously rapturous reviews, he seems to take offense only at Cozzens's intellectual and aesthetic failures—until the final paragraphs, where he unobtrusively changes the subject. At the end of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, he writes, Ilyich “feels free because he is compelled to reject his past as ‘not the right thing’”; he has made a morally decisive choice. At the end of *By Love Possessed*, Cozzens's hero Arthur Winner, “for complicated pragmatic-sentimental reasons, . . . is allowed to accept his past, is even thanked by his best friend for having concealed from him that fact that he had cuckolded him.” The passive acceptance that the novel portrays and performs is the same moral failure that Macdonald saw in *Our Town*:

The last words of the book are Winner's . . . : “I'm here.” It's all right, nothing has to be changed: “I have the strength, the strength to, to—to endure more miseries,” thinks Winner, gratefully.

Midcult critics, like Stalinist ones, “assumed it was good for writers to identify themselves with their society, which in turn assumed the society was good.” Macdonald valued the modernist avant-garde of Joyce, Eliot, Picasso, and Stravinsky partly because, in his eyes, it had made a moral judgment by refusing to accept its society as good.

2.

In some of the essays in this book, Macdonald refers to literary “standards” almost as if he were a reactionary defender of eternal truths. He makes it clear in only one of these essays (“The Triumph of Fact”) that he was not:

An umpire, like a scientist, deals with measurable phenomena according to generally accepted rules, but the critic works with standards peculiar to himself, although they somehow correspond to standards each of his readers has individually developed. . . . While Faulkner's superiority over Marquand cannot be proved, it can be demonstrated. This is a different operation involving an appeal—by reason, analysis, illustration, and rhetoric—to cultural values which critic and reader have in common, values no more susceptible of scientific statement than are the moral values-in-common to which Jesus appealed but which, for all that, exist as vividly and definitely as do mercy, humility, and love.

Politics, like aesthetics, was ultimately moral: “Socialism is primarily an ethical matter. The number of people who want it at any given moment has nothing to do with its validity for the individual who makes it his value.” Because he saw politics as a means of putting moral values into practice, he felt obliged to change his political views—abandoning his pacifism, accepting a lesser-evil argument in the face of postwar Stalinism—when he saw that they had diverged from his ethical ones.

He never expected politics and ethics to coincide exactly. He wrote to a friend:

You are right about the necessity of redefining Justice and other values in the light of concrete historical conditions, but there must also be an absolute, nonhistorically relative content to be redefined. . . . More and more I come up against the fact that we must face and live with contradictions of this kind (Justice is both historically relative, as Marx said it was, and absolute, as Plato did), must live dangerously intellectually. . . .

Sectarians on the left believed justice to be relative; on the right, absolute. Both views, Macdonald thought, led to injustice; both were tempting because they offered a straightforward solution to an impossible problem. Relative and absolute justice could never be reconciled, and Macdonald believed that real injustice could be resisted only by those who understood this, who refused the safety of sectarian dogma and chose instead to “live dangerously intellectually.” Gandhi—“the last political leader in the world who was a person, not a mask or a radio voice or an institution”—triumphed partly because he was unbothered by the contradiction between his absolute ideals and his “compromised” politics.

Macdonald believed that an active subjective judgment was a more valid way to approach moral reality than any fixed, existing system, whether it based itself on allegedly scientific Marxist authority or on divine authority. And he believed that subjective judgment was required in order to achieve any real community:

I think each man’s values come from intuitions which are peculiar to himself and yet—if he is talented as a moralist—also strike common chords that vibrate respondingly in other people’s consciences. This is what ethical teachers have always done; it is the only way we have learned anything essential about ethics or communicated our discoveries to others. . . .

He took it for granted that even if morality could only be approached subjectively, it was still, as Wittgenstein said about ethics, “a condition of the world, like logic.” A moral course of action was therefore always a pragmatic one, even when appearances argued otherwise. A typical headline in *Politics* asked the question “How ‘Practical’ Is a Racially Segregated Army?,” which Macdonald answered by demonstrating on both practical and moral grounds that commonsense arguments for segregation were “uncommon nonsense.” The Allies’ “appalling ‘unconditional surrender’ policy” in World War II, he wrote in 1945, was both immoral and impractical. It convinced the German people, “as Hitler’s most frenetic orations could not have convinced them, that their only hope was to stand firm behind the Nazis”; it refused support to the July 1944 conspirators who hoped to assassinate Hitler and negotiate peace; it prolonged the war at the cost of thousands of lives. “Illogic and immorality,” as he called them, were inseparable from each other. Hardheaded realists who could not recognize their moral failures could never understand their practical ones.

Almost everything Macdonald wrote, including his comic parodies and his rhetorical set-pieces,

seems to have been written in the voice of his conscience. When he reprinted his essays he typically peppered them with such renunciatory footnotes as, “Untrue, indeed the reverse of the truth,” or, “No! No! Marxistical baby-talk!”¹ Hannah Arendt, noting his reputation for “changing his mind,” observed in these pages:

No one, of course, who is willing to listen to reason and to reality can help changing his mind, but most of us do this imperceptibly, hardly being aware of our changes, whereas Macdonald in a veritable furor of intellectual integrity and moral honesty sets out to hunt down his “mistakes,” without ever changing the record in the slightest, his technique being to annotate his earlier articles with refutations of himself.²

Macdonald heeded his conscience even when it made painful accusations; his friends noticed that the only reliable way to shut him up in an argument was to accuse him of unconscious anti-Semitism. He seems to have been untempted by the all too common tendency to denounce someone else for faults that one can't bear to see in oneself. The name-calling fury with which at least one reviewer of *Masscult and Midcult* anathematized its author suggests that Macdonald may have given unwelcome voice to the reviewer's conscience as well as his own.

3.

Dwight Macdonald was born in 1906 and christened with the family name of his father's grandmother. The Dwight family of New England was to Yale what the Adams, Eliot, and Lowell families were to Harvard. Each family produced one or more presidents of the college or the nation. Each produced a volatile and often tormented moralist-aesthete: Henry Adams, T.S. Eliot, Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald.

At Yale, Macdonald had no politics but he was already brash about his aesthetics. When the college newspaper refused to print his column accusing an English professor of incompetence, he tried to circulate it as a handbill. Threatened with expulsion, he suppressed the piece, but in later life his offended conscience forbade such compromises.

He graduated in 1928, convinced that the future belonged to America's businessmen, not to its artists and writers. A few months' training for an executive post at Macy's convinced him otherwise. He found a job with Henry Luce's sumptuous new business magazine *Fortune*; he disliked the subject matter but liked the paycheck, and his energetic style made prosaic corporations sound exciting even when he criticized them. His contempt for business was apolitical until the Great Depression impelled him to find a social conscience. He married Nancy Rodman, an heiress with Communist leanings who encouraged his emerging Marxism. In 1936 he quit *Fortune* after provoking his editors with a Marxist analysis of the steel industry and refusing to accept their red-penciling.

By 1937, appalled by Stalinism, he was a committed Trotskyite. The future that had once

belonged to businessmen now belonged to the working class. In *Partisan Review* and other more-or-less Trotskyite magazines he welcomed the impending socialist revolution and pitied *The New Yorker* as “an accurate expression of a decaying social order.” By the early 1940s, events had refuted all his predictions, notably his expectations of a “Third Front” that would rise up against both sides in World War II, and he abandoned his fantasies of an inevitable future. The future belonged to no one. It would be made, he insisted, not by destiny or any immutable force but by conflicts among free individual choices—including ones made by evil dictators and those who resisted them.

Macdonald’s failure as a prophet freed him to be critical, ironic, and hortatory with no illusion that he spoke on behalf of the future or as a mouthpiece for infallible doctrine. Responding to a letter complaining that *Politics* was a “treacherous and obstructive” magazine, he defended himself by quoting one of his intellectual heroes writing about another, Alexander Herzen on Proudhon: “His strength lay not in construction but in criticism.” “The motto on his shield,” he later wrote of himself, “is a bold ‘YES BUT—.’”

In his essays for *Partisan Review* he tended to write as a collective “we.” Now he wrote in the first-person singular. *Politics* was a one-man magazine that expressed his own views—and also those of Georges Bataille, Simone de Beauvoir, Paul Goodman, Marshall McLuhan, George Orwell, and angry readers and friends who disputed everything he wrote. He observed that his one-man magazine presented a wider variety of opinion than was found in committee-run magazines like *Partisan Review*.

Macdonald kept *Politics* focused on what he called in a letter “the great theme of our day... moral responsibility and courage.” His magnificent 1945 essay “The Responsibility of Peoples” (not in *Masscult and Midcult*) detailed the logical and moral faults of arguments that accused the German people of collective guilt for the death camps—or the American and British people for the mass bombing of civilians. Collective guilt was real, Macdonald added, but only when an entire community approved or participated in the crime—as in lynchings in the American South. Many years later he saw collective guilt in American opinion polls that favored the bombing of Vietnam.

His essays in *Politics* annoyed or outraged many of his friends, but, he wrote, “it was, oddly enough, the emphasis on morality that caused the most scandal.” Irving Howe, in a response to Macdonald titled “The 13th Disciple,” shuddered over “the dangerous waters in which he is wading,” dangerous because “from talk of Absolute Morality to talk of God... is but a short step.” Howe needn’t have worried. As Macdonald wrote later, “Religion... bores me even more than Marxism”; both, in his view, falsely offered impersonal truths unattainable by personal convictions.

Bored as he was by Marxism, he retained some Marxist ways of thinking. His analysis of mass

culture depended heavily on the idea of an economic base concealed by a cultural superstructure; both masscult and midcult produced commodity art on an industrial scale; both were celebrity cultures that circulated another “commodity, Personality.” Like Engels on Balzac, Macdonald valued works of art that, against their maker’s intention, revealed truths about the society they celebrated: Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* is “evilly motivated, ...but since she is an artist she can’t help clarifying.” Although Macdonald “never had any interest in religion, or God,” he always had “much in Jesus, none in Christ”—the moral man, not the anointed savior. From his New England Congregationalist ancestors to Macdonald the “good Christian atheist,” as he once described himself, was but a short step. Macdonald worked toward an absolute secular morality at the same time, and in much the same spirit, that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a Nazi prison cell, was working toward a “religionless Christianity.”

Macdonald’s pacifism led him to oppose American participation in the war against Germany, but by 1948 he confronted what he called “the pacifist dilemma”: there was no pacifist answer to the Soviet blockade of Berlin, just as there had been no pacifist answer (he now acknowledged) to Chamberlain’s capitulation at Munich ten years earlier. Macdonald now doubted “the political validity of a ‘Utopian’ ...position,” and renounced pacifism soon afterward.

His views on private life had changed in parallel with his political ones. He had grown dissatisfied with his companionable marriage to Nancy Rodman, and, in a long affair that he hoped for years would lead to marriage, found “a relationship unique in my life, a spontaneous, equal, reciprocal ...relation with a woman, which began on a sexual plane and developed into the strongest emotional tie I have ever felt.” Through his two sons he discovered a “deep feeling” for children. He told a friend: “reason, skepticism, irony, satire—these were my qualities until ...somewhere around the middle of editing *Politics*, I began more and more to feel the importance of Love.” His second marriage, to Gloria Lanier, was affectionate, stormy, and passionate.

In the 1950s Macdonald mostly lost interest in politics because, he said, it offered no moral problems worth thinking about. It took little effort to understand Stalinism as a great evil, more dangerous even than Nazism because it won support by claiming moral purpose. The evils of American mass culture were less obvious but still urgent:

If the US doesn’t or cannot change its mass culture ...it will lose the war against [the] USSR. Americans have been made into permanent adolescents by advertising, mass culture—uncritical, herdminded, pleasure-loving, concerned about trivia of materialistic living, scared of death, sex, old age....

Macdonald’s essays on culture—mostly in the calm columns of *The New Yorker*—had the same urgent motives that had driven his essays on politics.³

The Vietnam War brought him back to the podium and the barricades. During the Columbia

événements of 1968, he lost friends when he publicized his support for Students for a Democratic Society—support that was clear-eyed and often critical, and which he withdrew as SDS turned violent. He argued in letters to friends and newspapers that a moral protest against injustice will always attract amoral thugs who give the authorities an excuse to discredit it, but he refused to be distracted from the moral urgency of the protest itself.

Macdonald died in 1982, dispirited by years of ill health. *Masscult and Midcult* displays his skeptical brilliance about contemporary culture; his strictures on Hemingway, for instance, are both comic and convincing because he writes them in Hemingway's own style. But by recalling Macdonald mostly as a contrarian, this selection (and all the commentaries on it I have seen) tends to obscure his moral passion and intellectual depth. A further volume of selections would be welcome. It might include "The Responsibility of Peoples"; his essays on Gandhi and Dorothy Day; his review of Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (the review prompted John F. Kennedy to launch his antipoverty program); his defense of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the midst of the Kulturkampf against it; and a 1947 piece titled "Why Destroy Draft Cards?" A suitable title might be one with, in Macdonald's phrase, "a terribly old-fashioned ring," perhaps *Moral Essays*.

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1. A note headed "Sources" in this new selection lists only the original magazine appearances of each essay. The book in fact reprints the annotated, rewritten, and afterword-ed versions that Macdonald prepared for his collections *Against the American Grain* (1962) and *Discriminations* (1974). ↩
 2. "He's All Dwight," *The New York Review*, August 1, 1968. ↩
 3. *Dwight Macdonald on Movies* (Prentice-Hall, 1969), an exhilarating selection of his film reviews, displays a moral intelligence that never comes into conflict with aesthetic pleasure. ↩