India: A Wounded Civilization
by V.S. Naipaul
(Knopf: 191 pp.; $7.95)

Martin Green

This book is a good deal more impressive than it seemed in the extracts that were printed in The New York Review of Books. What spoiled those was a cynicism and disgust so deep they blurred the vision and even the voice, and an exasperation that amounted to malice in his comments on people. These qualities are regularly in Naipaul's writing. They made his earlier book on India, An Area of Darkness, much resented there. And no doubt this book will be too. Some of the people he talked to, and their friends, will be stung by the terms he uses about them; and his criticism of intermediate technology is so convulsed with irritation as to be barely intelligible. But to read the book as a whole is to be convinced that Naipaul was deeply engaged by his subject, that he does have something to say, and that anyone who cares about India should read him.

Naipaul is not a great journalist in the way that, say, Mailer is. There is reportage here, for instance, on the Shiv Sena army of the poor in Bombay, but Naipaul treats such subjects distantly and meagerly in terms of both facts and feelings; he tells one only that the subject exists. But what we have here is a passionate conviction that works itself out, not in a reasoned argument, but in a hundred concentric observations, phrased with intellectual and emotional resonance. Perhaps the keynote is something he says in the foreword about his "Indian memories"—family customs he saw as a child in Trinidad but dismissed or forgot as he grew up; he says they are "like trapdoors into a bottomless past." The rest of the book makes it clear that this means not merely something long but something appalling.

Naipaul's point of view is completely modernist and antitraditionist. He sees Hinduism as an ideology of self-destruction; "karma, the Hindu killer, the Hindu calm...the distress we see is to be relished as religious theatre." The power of continuance on which it prides itself has always been a readiness to retreat. "When the world had shrunk, and ideas of human possibility had become extinct, the world could be seen as complete. Men had retreated to their last, impregnable defences: their knowledge of who they were, their caste, their karma, their unshakable place in the scheme of things; and this knowledge was like the knowledge of the seasons." Hinduism, he says, has not been good enough. It has kept the millions in their misery.

Naipaul advances a psychoanalytic theory of the Indian mind. Indians' sense of reality has never undergone the discipline of the Reality Principle. They still know external things as the outer limits of themselves. Every detail of the individual's behavior is regulated by his social group, so that perception is a social rather than an individual function, and the ego remains underdeveloped. As a piece of psychoanalytic theory, this looks poor stuff to me, but as a picturesquely put observation it is interesting. I would choose a more historical foundation. When Naipaul says, "In the high Hindu idea of self-realization...there was no idea of a contract, between man and man," I think of the Mayflower Compact, and all that followed from it for America. Nothing like that happened in India, and Gandhi's reawakening of the nation did not call it in that direction.

"The past has to be seen to be dead; or the past will kill."

Given Naipaul's modernism, Gandhi is of course the villain of this piece. But given that fact, Naipaul's treatment of Gandhi is not ungenerous or, by and large, unintelligent. The chapter about him is titled "A Defect of Vision," the defect being self-absorption. And these are some rather extraordinary remarks; such as that Gandhi was always—on the evidence of the autobiography—headed for lunacy but was rescued by the good-
ings of the non-Indian ideas he met in England and South Africa. And there are serious errors in logic, such as appropriating to Naipaul’s own argument Tolstoy’s comment that Gandhi’s Hindu nationalism spoiled everything, which in fact Tolstoy’s point was quite the opposite—he wanted Gandhi to go further in the direction from which Naipaul wants him to turn back.

Compared with Ved Mehta’s recent book, Gandhi and His Apostles, Naipaul’s treatment of Gandhi is, I think, serious, and that is not easy for a man in his position. He says at the end that the many-sided Gandhi permeates modern India, split up into different options, the way a novelist permeates his novel. Of course his point is that those different options, notably the political and the religious, now cancel each other out. And this leads on to the argument that nowadays the Indian past, like the classical past at the moment of the European Renaissance, “can be possessed only by inquiry and scholarship, by intellectual rather than spiritual discipline. The past has to be seen to be dead; or the past will kill.” It is because Gandhi is dead that we can see him as great. But still the image of Gandhi permeating all India remains large and exciting. This is a book for all who care about Gandhi or about India.

Turning East
by Harvey Cox

(Simon and Schuster; 192 pp.; $8.95)

Richard John Neuhaus

A few years ago some Hare Krishna followers dropped in on Harvey Cox at his Cambridge, Massachusetts, home and he was intrigued. “I thought I might even write a book on the subject.” Opening his eyes he beheld all sorts of “neo-orientalism” thriving in Cambridge, including 3HO (Happy, Holy, Healthy Organization). Some of them let him “sit” with them for meditation. That was the beginning. “The journey I made, while helping me to appreciate more deeply what the East has to teach us today, also made me in some ways more Christian than I had been at the beginning.” Mr. Cox believes he may be a little ahead of his time. “My guess is that the same thing, or something very similar, will happen to a lot of us before many more years go by.”

In the second chapter he describes his private exercises with Zen and its notoriously elusive koans. “Finally, after several weeks of mounting fury and anxiety, I quit. I knew that I had gone far enough so that the next step would no longer be ‘having a go’ at Zen, but ‘being had’ by Zen.” “To pursue Zen any further I would need a master.” The next chapter is about a night spent north of Mexico City with a group made up mainly of North Americans. They ate peyote under the direction of some Huichole Indians. The Indians told them they should spend the night “talking with our own gods and our own forebears.” So Cox and his friends set up their stereo equipment and played Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and Gregorian chant. It was an exciting night. Substances like peyote are the psychological equivalent of nuclear energy, capable of doing enormous good and creating awesome destruction.” “When I saw the morning star in the desert sky, I heard (a hymn) sung by a fifty-thousand-voice choir, or so it seemed. And, as the McDonald’s people say, ‘it was all for me.’” The search for such experience is “a scream of longing for what a consumer culture cannot provide—a community of love and the capacity to experience things intensely.”

In the fourth chapter he visits a Buddhist study center in Colorado. His spiritual quest had taken him across the line. “I was now writing about a phenomenon I was part of, and my evaluations and criticisms would now be judgments about myself.” Precisely. After a pleasant summer “I came away convinced that sitting-type meditation is perfectly compatible with Christian life.”

The following chapter is an excursus on modern culture’s need for the equivalent of the Sabbath. “Sabbath links God and world and human beings in a dialectic of action and rest, of purposeful doing and ‘just sitting.’” “It is foolish, however,