

'religious' or 'messianic' phenomenon; the anarcho-syndicalist conception of pre-revolutionary struggle provided a more convincing interpretation of social reality for C.N.T. militants than did its main rival, third-international-communism.

David Apter contributes a rather silly introduction on some structural features of anarchism: 'What a contrast between say Bakunin and Marx for whom radicalism was less a matter of disgruntlement than prediction' (p. 6). 'In short, when the property of a youth

subculture, violence is a psychological necessity' (p. 10). James Joll sums up on those features of classical anarchism which persist today. This book is perhaps best seen as a rather poor product of a flowering of interest in anarchism and 'primitive' socialism, which has produced much more important fruit in the reprinting of some of Kropotkin's major works, and the publication of a selection of Fourier's writings in English.

T. G. ASHPLANT

**THE EDGES OF LANGUAGE**, by Paul van Buren. *SCM Press*. 178 pp. £2.50.

This is the first full-length book by Professor Van Buren since the much-discussed *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*. Although it modifies many of the positions taken up in the earlier book, this work remains firmly in the post-Wittgensteinian linguistic-analysis tradition, and tackles the questions of religious language and belief from the standpoint of the *Philosophical Investigations*. The first two chapters review the problem of religion (i.e. the problem of how to talk about God in a secular, technological age which can no longer conceive of 'God' as a clear name of an individual, personal being who is beyond ordinary experience) and some linguistic-analysis-type answers to it (e.g. Braithwaite's moralistic approach, Wisdom's approach through the idea that religious stories give us new ways of looking at the familiar world, etc.). The conclusion is that religion is inextricably connected with linguistic behaviour—i.e. with how religious people use words—and that we therefore need to go back to first principles about the nature of language. There follows a chapter on the centrality of language in the business of being human and experiencing the world, and this leads on to the core of the argument, which is that of its very nature religious language is language being used at its 'edges' instead of at its centre. There are certain well-established ways of using words, 'non-nonsense areas well within the edges of language, where the rules are clear, their application is undisputed, and language is safely unproblematic' (p. 83). But some people, for some reasons, want to venture away from these 'safe' areas to the edges where the application is tricky, the meanings often unclear, the going dangerous. Religious language is like this. Religious talk stretches language to the limit, to the point where it stops just short of being nonsense, i.e. non-language. There is a

need to move to the edges of language if we wish to speak about certain kinds of things, or to do certain things (e.g. make jokes, write poetry, etc.). What distinguishes the Christian use of language at the edges of meaning is not the use of words like 'God' to refer to an individual being called God, but rather the stretching of language about a particular piece of history (i.e. Israelite history as continued in the New Testament) so that it comes to have a comprehensive meaning, for the future as well as the past, which no 'safe' talk about history could possibly have. The word 'God' then becomes, not a term referring to any transcendent being, but simply 'the point at which the religious man has come up against the final limit of what he can say about the object of his concern' (p. 135). If this is not clear, then I suspect it is the author's fault: for this reader at any rate never became any clearer than this about what the word 'God' is supposed to do in religious language.

I find the book, for all its patient, rather pedestrian clarity of exposition, unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. One is that the shrewd hits it occasionally makes against the capitalist order (e.g. 'it is . . . characteristic of an acquisitive capitalist society like ours to be suspicious of the borders of language. . . . In a culture that wants business to be business, and no nonsense, fascination with the fringes of language will involve being at the fringes of society', p. 99) do not fully dispel the latent snobbery of its basic assumption, namely that the test of a religious language must be whether it passes the scrutiny of 'educated Christians in the West in this last third of the twentieth century' (p. 1). By not bothering to look seriously at the language used by *uneducated* Christians—that is, people who know nothing about philosophy but who stand in the mainstream of Christianity by their

adherence to the Church or by the charitableness of their lives—Van Buren is surely dismissing, as of no philosophical account, a whole dimension of religious language. No doubt there is always a huge mass of muddled thinking, superstition, illogicality and even idolatry in the ‘actual consciousness’ (to use the term from Lukacs and Goldmann) of any religious group, or church. But it is simply too easy to dismiss all this as merely the mistake of ‘doctrinal literalists’ in order to concentrate on a little, highly unrepresentative group of ‘educated Christians’ who have (supposedly) seen through the absurdities of such literalism, and arrived at the Church’s ‘potential consciousness’. For if we are to talk about a religion, and its ‘logic’, not about the philosophical/theological views of a small atypical minority, we must begin by accepting the language of those who belong to that religion as a datum. Of course, if the datum is intrinsically and irredeemably wrong, then the religion as a whole is, quite simply, false. But if it is not irredeemably wrong, then we must take it seriously and try to see what it is up to. In this sense, it seems to me, what Van Buren calls ‘doctrinal literalism’ or ‘literal theism’—that is, the belief that the word ‘God’ does refer to a transcendent, personal creator of the world—is basic to the Christian *religion*, even if it is unacceptable to ‘educated Christians’. No doubt a great deal of sophisticated analysis must go into making certain that this belief is not nonsensical: but the analysis must not involve jettisoning the belief itself, for if that

happens then the religion must be judged erroneous, root and branch alike.

No doubt, Van Buren would argue—indeed he does argue—that the ideas about God held by ‘literal theists’ are not of the essence of the Christian gospel: in fact, the non-theistic ideas of his ‘educated Christians’ are, he claims, also those of authentic Christianity. But Van Buren seems to posit far too sharp a distinction between simple-minded theists and sophisticated non-theists. His literalists are straw men: the people he should have confronted are not the tub-thumping fundamentalists, but the theists who have sought to ‘stretch’ language by the theory of analogy.

Nowhere does Van Buren make a clear distinction between two quite different kinds of linguistic ‘stretching’: namely *metaphorical* stretching and *analogical* stretching. It seems to me that had he considered the implications of this most elementary distinction, he would have been able to retain a great deal of his thesis about language without having to jettison the Christian religion, as I think he does, in the process. It is a pity that he had to do so, for what would otherwise have been a very useful, and even searching, examination of the basis of Christian language has been partly spoiled by this over-simplification. Perhaps the book results from too much discussion in the seminar-room and the academic conference-hall, and not enough talk about religion in the public bar or on top of the Clapham omnibus.

BRIAN WICKER

**FROM ANECDOTE TO EXPERIMENT IN PSYCHICAL RESEARCH**, by R. H. Thouless. *Routledge and Kegan Paul*. 198 pp. £3.

This is a reliable, informative and exceptionally lucid guide to a controversial subject. Dr Thouless considers our empirical knowledge of paranormal phenomena to be insufficient to support or to discriminate between the plausibility of theories that have been put forward to explain them and therefore eschews all such speculation. He regards all scientific research as a puzzle-solving activity and parapsychology as presenting a particularly formidable puzzle. Precisely why psi phenomena should be as elusive as they appear to be is just part of that puzzle.

The author selects five outstanding experiments carried out over the last fifty years (two of them in the last five) which suggest that the case for the reality of the existence of

telepathy and clairvoyance is beyond reasonable doubt. The experimental evidence for precognition and psychokinesis he finds to be ‘very strong’ but clearly not as impressive, while that for post-mortem survival is virtually non-existent. It would seem that psychical research offers little reassurance to the seeker of marvels and the firmly entrenched sceptic alike.

Thouless suggests that the main purpose of psychical research is to find out more about the nature of psi phenomena while retaining the attempt to demonstrate the existence of psi as an essential but subsidiary activity. This is a logically sound policy. Acceptance of a fact cannot but accompany understanding of that fact.