

ENGLISH PROSE STYLE by *Herbert Read* (HENRY HOLT; \$2.50)

MR. HERBERT READ is a sound and reliable critic, of the painstaking sort, and his book on style is, if not brilliant, at any rate an extremely useful and careful survey of a difficult subject. In the last analysis, style is the man. When we come to the affair of analyzing a man or personality as it reveals itself in a literary style, we come to an affair which might baffle even a psycho-analyst. At most we can hold the thing up to the light and see it sparkle. We can say of it that it has this color or that or that it contains such-and-such a proportion of this or that ingredient. We will come no nearer, or little nearer, to a profound understanding of its causes, or to acquiring, by so superficial a scrutiny, a brilliant or beautiful or individual style for ourselves. Mr. Read, of course, knows this and, on the whole, he has gone about his work very sensibly: he has given us a wide range of quotation from English prose, admirably commented upon. This, alone, would make his book exceedingly useful to the student of English literature and would sharpen his instinct for those vague qualities which make a style good or bad.

When Mr. Read is on more theoretical ground, one is not always quite so sure of him. He tends to a perilous kind of abstraction, no doubt forced upon him by the shadowy nature of his subject and by his desire to formulate large and general rules which might be universally applicable. Unfortunately, it is precisely when we attempt this kind of formulation that we involve ourselves, almost inevitably, in those simplifications of category which lead us either into a vagueness so glassy as to be useless or into downright psychological error. For example, "When thought is apprehended emotionally, by a process which we shall be careful to define, we give persuasive power to intelligence, and when sensibility and emotion are conjoined we get a direct form of expression

which we shall consider under the heading of personality". This sounds very well, until we try to extract a valid meaning from it. But one suspects that one will get little "forrader" with this delicate business by an intellectual stalking so heavy-footed. Either we must go all the way toward the psychological end of our approach, as Kostyleff and others have tried to do—going right *under* such abstractions as "sensibility", "intelligence", "emotion", "personality"—or we must content ourselves with an approach frankly analogical and poetic. Mr. Read tends to fall between, and to use such terms as the above too discretely and solidly, and too much as if they corresponded to verifiable facts.

CONRAD AIKEN

THE STRANGE NECESSITY by *Rebecca West* (DOUBLEDAY, DORAN; \$3.00)

THERE was a time when Miss Rebecca West was a regular contributor of critical articles and reviews to *The New Statesman* in London; and from that time dates her reputation as a sort of feminine *enfant terrible* of criticism. It is no exaggeration to say that a great many people used to read *The New Statesman* solely because Miss West was usually to be found there and could invariably be counted on to be amusing, witty, very much to the point and, perhaps, usefully destructive. She had a merciless eye for sentimentality in any form and, if one thing delighted her more than any other, it was the exposure of any sort of literary sham. She gave and expected no quarter and she was treated by her fellow critics with the greatest respect, not to say gingerliness.

Nevertheless, one suspects that Miss West belongs rather with the type of journalist-critic than with that soberer and perhaps duller company who, caring little whether their audience is amused or not, give themselves up to a pure passion for exploration or analysis. There is a good deal of the show-woman in her. She is frankly and charm-

ingly pleased with her own intelligence and with the fact that it is she, Miss West, a very wise and very shrewd and very emancipated young Englishwoman of the Twentieth Century, who is being intelligent. Her approach is a highly personal one; any literary problem is *her* literary problem; and in the very foreground of the literary scene, lest it be allowed to become too bitterly abstract for a degenerate generation too long nourished on newspapers and movies to be responsive, we have Miss West herself engagingly posed with her gloves and her parasol, her passport and her ticket for the Blue Train and, incidentally, under her arm, her copy of *Ulysses*.

And she makes a very good show of it, too. Her eager discovery of the necessity for Miss West of great art—with Mr. Joyce as the Virgil who guides her through the underworld—is made into a very entertaining and useful book. Her notion of art as a kind of collective super-cortex of the human mind is well deployed, with a good deal of psychological and biological reference; and her comments by the way on *Ulysses* and Proust and Mr. George Moore and Mr. Yeats are often exceedingly good, especially her analysis of the sentimentalism of Mr. Joyce, which will make many admirers of *Ulysses* very uncomfortable. All the same, one begins after a little to feel that Miss West is a shade too careless with us. She is in a hurry—she has so much to do—tea in Montmartre, Versailles to be visited, a pair of hats to be bought, letters to be answered—and one has the impression that she is talking rapidly to us over her shoulder as she departs for Antibes. Her pages become a little bit garrulous, a little bit shapeless; her sentences attenuate themselves from cursive to discursive; now and then she actually misuses a good word like “fundament”. In short, we begin to discover that she writes pretty badly. This is a great pity, for she *is* intelligent, as her excellent little monograph on Henry James has already proved for us. If she could somehow manage to treat her

audience a little less as if it were gathered for tea and her writers a little less as if they were dilapidated lions collected for the occasion to have their manes combed and their tails pulled—one might feel surer of her future position. As it is, one feels that perhaps her years are numbered.

CONRAD AIKEN

THE GARMENT OF PRAISE: THE NECESSITY FOR POETRY by Eleanor Carroll Chilton and Herbert Agar (DOUBLE-DAY, DORAN; \$5.00)

WITH dignity and conviction, Eleanor Chilton and Herbert Agar, who are themselves makers of verse of some merit, have written a defense of poesy for our age. Their book is well informed by scholarship, agreeably written, and genuinely thoughtful. I hope that it will be widely read, for it should both enlarge contemporary perspectives on poetry and restore some standards we have neglected to keep in mind.

At the beginning, the authors set forth their hierarchy of poetic values. One rises, according to them, from a poetry of virtuosity exemplified in Swinburne's *Ballad of Dreamland* to poetry of vision as in Keats's *Ode to A Nightingale* and finally to poetry of prophecy with Dante and Milton as the foremost examples. This is well enough, though a psychological progression from sentiment (minor verse) to reflective emotion (major verse) to impersonal delight (minor poetry) to, at last, ecstasy (major poetry) will tell us more about the topography and the dwellers of Parnassus, and will avoid the cant about the “spirit” and “spirituality” into which these authors often lapse.

Then comes a quite admirable and refreshing history of English poetry which I think is the most valuable feature of *The Garment of Praise*. The authors know English history almost as well as English poetry and succeed in linking them without straining either. Miss Chilton is bold enough to say that