

cinema-rights. The screen magnates seem to view life from a standpoint peculiarly their own. Luckily they are satisfied to "alter" such novels as they want for their theatres, and the novelist in theory remains free to write what he will. Yet the cinema has not been without its effect on our fiction, though I would hesitate to say precisely what that effect has been.

What else can I say? Apart from the detective-

puzzles, no one *kind* of story seems to be more popular than others, though the "love-interest" very naturally maintains its importance as a central theme. But ignore those *dates*—since the War so necessary a feature in the chronicles and the sagas—and ignore the occasional use of very curious words, and could you say that there is very much difference between the Edwardian novels and those of to-day?

THIS AGE IN LITERARY CRITICISM

By F. R. Leavis

THE period since the War will be remarkable in literary history for its critical activity. This assertion may at first surprise some who are aware of the present condition of critical journalism. No one interested in literature can make light of this condition, which in an account of the "Age in Criticism" demands—but, for lack of space, cannot have here—more notice. But nevertheless it is necessary to insist that the achievement of the age in literary criticism is a very remarkable one. Let no one go on to conclude that this critical achievement will be explained by, or coupled with, creative weakness. To suppose that criticism and creation are antipathetic, that either thrives at the expense of the other, is to betray very shallow notions of both. Criticism is the deliberate pursuit of the highest possible degree of awareness where creative work is concerned; awareness of the ways in which it affects us, of what has been attempted and what done, and of the conditions and possibilities of creation.

It is not for nothing that the periods of creative stir have also been notable for criticism. And especially should we expect to find creation accompanied by criticism at times of re-orientation, when the tradition is being revised; when, immediate tradition having failed the artist, having (as it recurrently does) become an obstacle between the ways of feeling, the kinds of consciousness, he has to express and the expressing of them, he must cast about to establish new bearings. Such a time was the end of the eighteenth century,

when criticism was associated with creation in the persons of the great creative chiefs, Coleridge and Wordsworth: we cannot imagine such an achievement as theirs, such a re-orientation of English poetry as they effected, apart from a high degree of critical awareness.

A valuable parallel might be drawn between the conditions then and the conditions in our own age. Coleridge and Wordsworth are represented by Mr. T. S. Eliot (or, shall we say, by Mr. Eliot and Mr. Ezra Pound?—for these two also appear to have worked at one time in close association). "The important critic," says Mr. Eliot, in "The Sacred Wood," "is the person who is absorbed in the present problems of art, and who wishes to bring the forces of the past to bear upon the solution of these problems." He explains here how it is that the essays printed in "The Sacred Wood," which came out in 1920, and in the later pamphlet, "Homage to John Dryden," have, though together they bulk so small and though they deal mainly with seventeenth century subjects, had so decisive an influence. For it is Mr. Eliot's distinction, both as critic and poet (one cannot imagine them apart—the creative achievement is essentially also a critical one), to have been the first to see what the present problems of poetry were. His poetry and his criticism together have provided the only kind of general "solution" possible: they have reconstituted the current idea of the English poetic tradition in such a way as to attract once more towards poetry the adult intelligence, which the tradition as transmitted from the Romantics by the nineteenth century had come to exclude. The seventeenth century (of Shakespeare, Donne and Marvell) now counts for incomparably more in the tradition as it affects practising poets than the nineteenth.

This, in one sense, is the great critical achievement of our time, and if it has not fructified in a poetic renaissance comparable to that initiated by Coleridge and Wordsworth (it is early yet to take stock), it is apparent in all serious contemporary criticism of poetry. But it is an achievement of criticism in alliance with creation. The more purely critical achievement of our time is an immense improvement in the methods and apparatus of criticism; improvement in the sense that, other things being equal—which they are not—it is easier to write good criticism now than it ever was before. The reader no doubt anticipates a tribute to psychology. And one must be paid; but not, probably, of a kind that is widely expected. To begin with, it is necessary to say bluntly that psychoanalysis has been, for those interested in literary criticism, merely a nuisance, fostering in the guise of criticism all kinds of



I. A. Richards.
Photo by Elliott & Fry.

pretentious impertinences and irrelevances—"explanations" of art, artists and works of art. It is a weakness characteristic of our age to itch to tell the world, and to feel enlightened when told, that Hamlet illustrates the "Œdipus complex" and that Othello suffered from impotence. All this is nonsense, and commonly nasty. Nor has the respectable science of psychology, in so far as there is one, done as much for criticism as might have been expected. It has indeed done a great deal for incompetent critics, by providing them with assurance and a vocabulary—enabling them, that is, to say nothing to the point in new ways. The psychologists, on the other hand, who have invaded art and literature may be competent psychologists, but it is plain that, to put it politely, they are not as a rule anything remotely like competent critics. There are however exceptions.

The great exception, the one that makes it necessary to pay a tribute to psychology, is Dr. I. A. Richards. He does not make great play with technical psychology in his books—"The Principles of Literary Criticism," "Science and Poetry" and "Practical Criticism"—and psychologists have been known to deny that psychology counts for much in them. But without a psychological training, it is plain, his books would not have been written. Such a training gave him his approach and his awareness of problems. His unquestionable achievement, and it is a very great one, has been to provide the critic with an incomparably better apparatus of analysis than existed before. It is now possible, thanks to him, to talk about a "poem," "form," "content," "rhythm," "meaning," and so on, and know what we are talking about, and to discuss the function of art without tumbling into the "Pleasure or Instruction?" set of confusions and heresies. He has aimed at a good deal more than this—at formulating, in short, a complete and completely scientific theory of criticism; and any estimate of his achievement as measured by this ambition must involve qualifications.

If on one side he descends from Coleridge, on the other he descends from Bentham—an odd liaison. The Coleridgean heritage is unqualified strength, and to say that the strongest part of the Ricardian principles was largely a restatement of the best of Coleridge would not be to belittle the restater; for "Biographia Literaria," for all the effect it had during the century following publication, might as well not have been written. Bentham is seen in the "scientific," i.e. quantitative, theory of value—a restatement of the Utilitarian. It is one thing to be convinced that Dr. Richards has disposed finally of Mr. Clive Bell and all theories of "Pure Art Value." It is quite another to feel that much is gained for criticism by a theory of value that encourages (as Dr. Richards explicitly does) the hope of its being eventually possible to determine experimentally the relative worth of two experiences of different minds.

But Dr. Richards's contribution is greater than has been suggested. He collaborated with Mr. C. K. Ogden in "The Meaning of Meaning," an inquiry into the nature of linguistic symbolism—into the ways in which words "mean"—and the consequent improvements that he has been able to make in the instruments of critical analysis are more subtle and important than it is possible to indicate here.

It is indeed a notable period in the history of criticism that produced both Dr. Richards and Mr. Eliot. For Mr. Eliot's critical influence should be as decisive upon the practice of criticism as upon the practice of poetry: his essays are models of critical method and procedure. Indeed they seem to define for the first time the very conception of *literary* criticism; the reader feels that what he has read elsewhere is more or less impure, more or less irrelevant.

It is to the earlier essays that this account applies. In the later, those in "For Lancelot Andrewes," Mr. Eliot is concerned avowedly, not, as before, to insist that when we are judging poetry we must judge it as poetry and not as another thing, but with religious and moral questions, with the pre-conditions of art and literature. It seems that the very strictness of his devotion to the idea of literary criticism—to the principle that because poetry, morals and religion are intimately related, it is essential to distinguish clearly between them—was a response to the difficulty of maintaining the distinctions.

This difficulty is characteristic of our age. The dissolution of the traditions, social, religious, moral and intellectual, has left us without that basis of things taken for granted which is necessary to a healthy culture. A serious literary critic nowadays cannot confine himself to literature. He inevitably slips into discussing the conditions—of society and civilisation—that underlie literature; into questioning whether literature will long remain possible. One may lament that Mr. Eliot no longer devotes himself to literary criticism, but one sees that the development was necessary and waits intently for what he may write next.

But in the more notorious case of Mr. Middleton Murry it is difficult not to lament a disaster. He was once a very fine critic. "The Problem of Style" remains one of the few valuable handlings of critical principle in the language, and the essays in "Aspects of Literature," written as weekly journalism a dozen years ago, still constitute perhaps the best introduction to post-War literature. But his religious writings of the past eight or nine years are alas! characteristic of our age—the age described by Mr. Eliot in these sentences: "When there is so much to be known, when there are so many fields of knowledge in which the same words are used with different meanings, when everyone knows a little about a great many things, it becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to know whether he knows what he is talking about or not. And when we do not know, or when we do not know enough, we tend always to substitute emotions for thoughts."

On the other hand, the general disintegration and disorder have favoured radical inquiries of kinds unthought of before, such as those of Dr. Richards and Mr. Eliot into the nature of "belief." Moreover, Mr. Empson's extraordinary and important book, "Seven Types of Ambiguity," must also be recognised as, in a sense, characteristic of the age. And from the rare but not impossible combination of competence in both psychology and literature we may expect more criticism of the kind represented by Mr. D. W. Harding's essay on "Nostalgia" in the May number of *Scrutiny*—a kind that, again, would be to the age's credit.

THIS AGE IN POETRY

By Stephen Spender

PEOPLE to-day talk a language which is different from the language spoken a hundred or two hundred years ago; they are absorbed in different interests, and if fundamentally they feel the same passions, these passions are directed to different objects. As long as people exist there are new things to say. As long as there are new things to say, poetry exists and has new things to say. The mistake is to suppose that poetry is separated from life, when it is clear that language, from which poetry is dependent, is at the very centre of life. People who suppose poetry to be separated from life foresee poetry coming to an end in the same way as the building of a tram-line is completed, or as a mine becomes exhausted of minerals, or as a branch of scientific observation comes to an end.

The Elizabethans were the greatest English poets, and they were not born in golden climes, nor did they live in worlds apart, nor were they afraid of having their poetic minds vexed with shallow wit. In fact their works are full of very shallow wit, and they are the better for it, because shallow wit reflects some of the life of that age. The lives of the Elizabethan poets are only exceptional in being more vivid and intense than those of their contemporaries; when we read about Ben Jonson, Marlowe, Beaumont and Fletcher, and about Shakespeare stealing a deer, these things become symbols to us of Elizabethan life.

In the same way we cannot read the work of the best of the War poets, Wilfrid Owen, without realising instantly the justice of his claim: "Above all, this book is not concerned with poetry. The subject of it is war and the pity of war."

Our poets should stop worrying about Poetry (Is it dying?), and about Science (Is it killing Poetry?), and about Books (There are so many of them; how can we keep pace?), and, above all, about themselves (Does Poetry really express my personality? Am not I overwriting myself?); perhaps then they would have time to reflect that we are living in one of the most remarkable ages it has ever been people's fortune or misfortune to live in. They might not like the age; the struggles of the men who represent a system which is now being overthrown might appear to them as sinister and unscrupulous as the actions of characters in "The White Devil." In my opinion the real contribution of "The Waste Land" to the problem of "Contemporaneity" is that Eliot's blank verse illustrates the parallel between our own world and the world of the late Elizabethans. On the other hand, they might be anxious to hail a new era; they might feel that scientific discovery was as exciting as the discovery of classical mythology, and that the construction of giant machinery was as exciting as the discovery of a new world; and that both these things were full of material for poetry. Think too of the lives of people to-day. Is not the life of the unemployed significant? The lives of workers, and the lives of rich people and even the lives of officials can all be seen now as being insecure, ready to fall into disaster or to form a new alignment.

Yet if one reads the works of most of our poets, one does not realise at all that we are living in an age in

which anything is happening. Our poets seem to live in a perpetual summer school, governed by a very free and easy blue-stockinged schoolmistress, who encourages them to write poetry about the school and its grounds. Some go into the garden and walk as far as the pond, where they write very short poems which show an immense knowledge of a very limited number of fish. Some go further afield and study the farmer at work with his plough. The more studious-minded sit indoors and read Greek. There are even a few who tinker about with the heating apparatus and the boiler in the kitchen; but without conviction. A few naughty ones play about all day in the dormitories. Mr. Roy Campbell is the naughtiest of them all; he screams and screams about "love's broncho-busting game," and the wickedness of the country that keeps "A million loafers on the dole," and he hates all the others.

If you doubt the truth of this, read Mr. Monro's anthology of twentieth century poetry. Half the poems in the book were clearly written in the summer school I have described.

Of course it is stupid to lay down rules about poetry of the sort that most of the younger writers who are trying to break away from the summer school (some of the best of them are represented in the anthology called "New Signatures," published by the Hogarth Press) seem anxious to lay down for themselves—such as that poetry must be about machinery, or the proletarian revolution, etc. But I think we may say that certain qualities which depend from contemporary life, and which could not possibly have been introduced into the work of writers in other centuries, characterise the best work that is being written to-day. For instance, Mr. W. H. Auden uses the imagery of psychoanalysis in his poetry where other writers have used pagan or Christian mythology. However there is nothing at all new in some other qualities which were lacking in the poetry of most of the Georgian anthologies, and which are never lacking in real poetry. The belief, for instance, that there is a purpose in life; and a sense of enjoyment.

The fault of those poets who first attempted to break away from the Georgian tradition was obscurity. The problem before poetry to-day is not to escape from life on to the snowy mountain peaks, nor to escape into itself, but to accept the life that is around us and, in the deepest sense, to enjoy it. T. S. Eliot's poetry, depressing as it may seem, is full of the enjoyment of experience; it never depresses one in the same way as does the cheerfulness of the nature poets who "try to see the best side of things." The fault is that it does not go far enough. More and more of the life around us has got to be enclosed in the area of enjoyment. Only when the poets have left their own cultured society, their starry nights, their mountain-tops and their shadowy caves will it be possible to create a new poetry that is popular, not in the sense that Miss Wilhelmina Stitch's poetry is popular, but in the sense that it is comprehensible to everyone in the whole of our society who has a true appreciation of poetry.