

Historical rôles, their "objective" tasks, than to their human meanings. It is the supreme virtue of Tacitus that, as we read him, the mists of

History fade away, and we see only "persecutions and the persecuted, and people opening veins in baths."

Irving Kristol

## A FEW POT-SHOTS AT THE GAGGLE

ONE of the recurring embarrassments of the reviewer's life is the book, thoroughly praised all round, which he feels to be bad before opening it and finds to be bad on reading it; and yet, when all is done, he is somewhat at a loss to explain either the mechanism by which his suspicions were aroused, or that by which they were confirmed. Mr. Richard Church's *The Dangerous Years*\* is, as far as I am concerned, a book of this nature.

Perhaps it is easiest to consider Mr. Church's virtues first. The personality that "comes through" *The Dangerous Years* is honest, sincere and decent, on the side of the angels, with the sheep against the goats; if his writing is sheepish rather than angelic, that is perhaps disappointing rather than surprising. I have unfortunately not read Mr. Church's recent prize-winning autobiography, *Over the Bridge*: that it should have been (as its reviewers claim) in any sense *well-written*, I find, on the evidence of the present book, incredible; but I have no doubt that it found its own excellence as a faithful image of the reactions of a sensitive and individual person to the world he lives in.

But the novel demands quite other virtues. Honesty, decency, and sincerity, for instance, are by no means incompatible with opinions that are commonplace, ill-founded, or plainly false—opinions which invalidate the novel but may well give autobiography (which is after all primarily self-portraiture) its especial force. *The Dangerous Years* seems to me replete with such prejudices, over-simplifications, and *idées reçues*, particularly those of a euphemistic nature and which betray themselves, so far as the novel is concerned, in the form of clichés and conventionalities of every conceivable sort. These extend to plot, to characters, to style, and to whatever is left over. The heroine of *The Dangerous Years*, Mary Winterbourne, is a sort of super-Mrs. Dale, a "still attractive" widow of fifty, exuding charm and "perfect taste" and horrible graciousness in every direction. She meets a "still attractive" ex-Colonel, "a bit of a black sheep" but weak rather than wicked, and

they "learn to love" each other. The sub-plot is concerned with Mary's daughter, a Cambridge don married to another who has so far failed to consummate their marriage on the grounds that "sex and all that" is likely to impair his abilities as a mountain-climber. These two are reconciled by their assuming joint temporary guardianship of an infant musical prodigy—"That night, he came through from his room, and for the succeeding nights they slept together, man and wife," apparently in the hopes of jointly producing a similar little prodigy, though for my own part I should say that if anything could keep one celibate it would be the prospect of that. It will be seen from this necessarily too-brief resumé that *The Dangerous Years* will appeal principally to the middle-aged woman, who is invited to identify herself with gracious, still attractive, Mary Winterbourne, so successful in "the blossoming of her autumn love," so very much one up on her donnish, ungracious, unsatisfied child.

This, I suppose, is part of the mechanism of suspicion: of course it may be by chance that a novel will appeal principally to the chief novel-reading sex and age-group, but the reviewer will be on his guard notwithstanding. The first *confirmation* of his suspicions will be the discovery that the book is written almost wholly in clichés or "phrases"—by which I mean turns of speech fully as ubiquitous as the cliché proper, but so colourless that only the assiduous novel-reader becomes conscious of them: things like "Later, when they were dressing . . ." (used after a love-scene which the novelist has seen fit not to describe), or "the poetry of medieval stonework," or "outlined her still slender figure"—indeed the use of "figure" for "body," or of "poetry" for any art but its own, or of "perfect" in almost any connection whatsoever are, in Mitfordian phrase, P-indicators. As for the clichés proper, they are of the most scaring type: "arrival of a family," "happy event," for child-birth; "interesting condition" for pregnancy; beauty that "must once have made men mad." Some of these elegancies are Mr. Church's own, others are from the mouths of his characters; the really distressing thing is that it is only the inverted comma that separates one from the other.

\* *The Dangerous Years*. By RICHARD CHURCH. Heinemann. 15s.

Tremendously undistinguished style does not of course in itself finally damn a novel; but unfortunately Mr. Church's characters not only utter clichés, they are clichés—the comic American, the “civilised” Parisian, the saintly doctor, Mrs. Dale herself, that terrible prodigy. And that is pretty conclusive. The things that happen to them, too, are clichés; especially the groaningly contrived ending which, by tumbling the climbing son-in-law off one of his mountains, confronts Mary Winterbourne with an entirely bogus “choice” between lover and widowed daughter—an insult to the characters had they ever (as they have not) been brought to life. (The best thing that can be said about it, is that it shows the Alpinist was *quite right* about the effects of “sex and all that” on his climbing; but this is a moral that Mr. Church fails to draw, somehow.)

There is only one other aspect of this book that I have space to touch on here: it is a sort of woolly middle-aged daydream, and, like most daydreams, extremely sensual. This may appear a surprising observation; but I believe it to hold true of most writers of Mr. Church's type. It is of course (I hasten to add) a *redeeming* feature, so far as it goes: but, though strong, the sensuality is of an immature, untutored, idealistic, and frequently embarrassing type. It is alternately repressed in euphemism and expressed in outbursts of mad suburban abandon that bring a blush to the most literature-hardened cheek:

*Tom had opened the venetian blind, saying that he wanted to see her beauty through all the sweet processes of love. She had replied that he was most un-English, and that she did not know whether she approved. They had laughed together, and he had had his way, in this and in what followed.*

All this may, I am afraid, seem unnecessarily close and pugnacious analysis of an eminently inoffensive, if undistinguished, book: but I think it is just as well for once to see exactly *what* is meant when the great gaggle of reviewers put their beaks together with one accord to cry “sensitivity,” “grace,” “insight,” “charm,” “lighted by truth,” “beautifully written.”

THE same cries will probably be uttered, though by a much smaller gathering, over Mrs. Noël Adeney's *No Coward Soul*.<sup>\*</sup> They will be as justified in this case as they were not in the last (which seems to me a sufficiently sad commentary on the present state of reviewing—what should be its most valuable terms have

been reduced by irresponsible misuse to the status of meaningless goose-noises). Suspicions will again be aroused by the blurb: “Mrs. Adeney's first novel is about friendship and courage. The narrator, Sydney, a happily married woman, becomes involved in the life of a young poet, Merton. Desperately injured in a railway accident, Merton is dying by inches. . . .” But unjustifiably. *No Coward Soul* would appear on the surface to have all the makings of a big bad bogus book; but it *really* has charm, intelligence, and style, and so it is nothing of the sort. Again the gaggle are for ever telling us “In any other hands but Mr. Ganglion's this theme would be sordid and painful, but —”; and when we read the book we find it *is*, precisely, sordid and painful. *No Coward Soul really* is not sordid and painful; it is extraordinarily assured and original, and I have no hesitation whatever in recommending it.

*The Bubblemakers*<sup>\*</sup> is a first novel by Mr. George J. W. Goodman, and another thoroughly good one. It too is, in a sense, about friendship and courage, or the lack of it. The principal characters are Judge Garnier, a courtly, eccentric, rather Emersonian, Southern gentleman, and his grandson Charley, a somewhat non-conforming alumnus of Harvard. Each is a little lonely, each depends on the other more than he realises. The judge attempts to educate his grandson into an understanding of oratory, family tradition, and fine brandy. Charley, largely unimpressed, in his turn tries to interest the judge in his utterly impracticable scheme for driving a jeep (which he has not got) through central Asia. The judge is unimpressed. Yet Mr. Goodman shows most skilfully that beneath the mutual unintelligibility a strongly marked family identity lies; and when the inevitable explosion occurs and the judge, whose powers of tolerance the years have finally a little sclerosed, kicks Charley out of the house, the tragic irony is moving and painful.

*No Coward Soul* is extremely English, in a now perhaps rather untypical way—set in a world of small country houses and minor arts assiduously cultivated. *The Bubblemakers* is intensely and peculiarly American, though again in a way unrepresented on the screen or in the average American-issue novel. Nothing indeed could be more superficially unlike than the “*milieu, matière et métier*” of these two first-novelists. Yet their differences fade to nothing against the high degree of originality, intelligence, and (another gaggle-cry!) promise that they possess in common: it is in more than one sense that they speak a common language.

<sup>\*</sup> *No Coward Soul*. By NOËL ADENEY. Hogarth. 13s. 6d.

<sup>\*</sup> *The Bubblemakers*. By GEORGE J. W. GOODMAN. Weidenfeld. 12s. 6d.

I WANT finally to say a few words about John Malcolm Brinnin's *Dylan Thomas in America*.\* Mr. Brinnin was Thomas's closest friend in the States, and also his lecture agent and general organiser; his book is simply a straightforward and patently truthful account of his relations with Thomas, and of Thomas's relations with America. There is no doubt at all that this book is going to raise a tremendous storm of anger and protest, of passionate support and counter-protest. This is for two main reasons. Firstly, the book necessarily consists principally of an endless roster of drinking-parties: what has always been known to Thomas's readers, and sedulously concealed from his fans—the fact that he died from acute and protracted alcoholism—is here for the first time stated in print unambiguously. Those who prefer their own emasculated fancies to the world's bitter facts will be hurt, outraged, cheated; others will say (in good faith but, I believe, mistakenly) that facts must not be blinked but equally need not be made public. Secondly, there will be a tremendous amount of taking sides. This is that sort of a book: the protagonists are likely to become as familiar and as fought over as, say, Lawrence, Frieda, Murry, Brett. Every reader will want to rush in and show how, if *he* had been there, the final terror and tragedy (using those words advisedly) of St. Vincent's Hospital could have been avoided.

I am only human enough to have my own "But surely's" and "If only's": but this is not the place to air them. I shall confine myself to two comments. Firstly, *this book is true*. It carries every internal and external mark of utter honesty. And this is an extraordinarily rare thing: the "truth" of literature or biography, and the truth of everyday life and conversation, are usually different things altogether; but *Dylan Thomas in America* is true in just this factual, "police-court" if you like, manner—it tells us exactly what parties Thomas went to, who with, what he drank there, what (if anything) he ate there, what he said there, and who he slept with afterwards. Whatever attacks Mr. Brinnin lays himself open to, lack of courage, documentation, or objectivity is not one of them. Secondly, the subject of the book is of the very highest importance: *the facts are worth knowing*. Thomas was one of the most gifted men of our times, and anyone who does not wish to understand, as far as is humanly possible, just how, just why he went to his destruction, is averting his eyes from one of the most meaningful tragedies of the age he lives in. For, whatever else in this ominous jungle must re-

\* *Dylan Thomas in America*. By JOHN MALCOLM BRINNIN. Dent. 18s.

a portrait of

T. E. LAWRENCE

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main obscure and tangled, one thing at least stands tolerably clear: that Thomas's death was in the full moral, if not the legal, sense a suicide. He had chosen to destroy himself, and drink was the selected weapon—sometimes he understood this, sometimes he fought against it, sometimes both, sometimes neither. Now, as always after a self-inflicted death, the friends and lovers gather round for self-accusation and mutual re-

crimination: what gives the death of Dylan Thomas its universal significance, is that here we are all friends and lovers, whether we "met" him or not, we all failed him. The last fifty pages of this book make as terrible reading as I have come across; if we take them as mere temperance-tract, instead of occasion for self-examination, Dylan Thomas will indeed have died in vain.

*Hilary Corke*

## FROM DIPLOMACY TO PUBLIC RELATIONS

IN AMERICA there is a large and growing literature of scholars' reflections on current affairs, reflections of a kind which lie half-way between contemporary history and advocacy of policies for the future. Many of these studies of recent diplomacy have been encouraged by some distinguished foundation, and they usually aspire to be at once academically solid and practically wise. They are generally less critical, more consciously respectable and responsible, than the equivalent work of the best journalists. Mr. Beloff's lectures,\* given at the Johns Hopkins University, and now published, belong to this governmental-academic type, and, within these limits, they are interesting; they are grave, statesmanlike, cautious, and well-documented; nothing rash is said, and nothing too sharply critical, and they will give no offence in America. The tone is that of a White Paper or of the report of a Royal Commission. Can a democracy follow a consistent and reasonable foreign policy? What is the appropriate machinery of diplomacy? The very moderation and Conservatism of Mr. Beloff's lectures may provoke one to think again about the assumptions which lie behind this quasi-official thinking; there may be a place for amateur speculation alongside his professional decorum.

What do we want from foreign policy? What in this sphere counts as success? Certainly a policy has been successful if over a number of years the country in question appears so strong, in virtue of its alliances and dependencies, that it is unlikely to be attacked or threatened by any rival, and if at the same time there is little danger of it being dragged into war in defence of its allies, or of its essential economic interests being sacrificed. The satisfaction of these three conditions clearly depends on correct calculations of power being made from year to year with

continuing vigilance. Mr. Beloff of course emphasises the calculation of power as the heart of the matter; it is in the tradition of governmental good sense to stress the realities of power and to deplore popular moral enthusiasms. But what is power for these purposes? How is it properly assessed? Surely the assessment has to be made differently in every age, as the means of production change and as political institutions change with them; ruin comes when the calculation of power is being made in some inherited measurement which no longer applies to elements in the actual world. Looking at only one element in the calculation, namely, the means of warfare, it may seem that in 1956 real power is concentrated, as never before, in the industrially most advanced countries, and very largely in two centres only, Washington and Moscow. But there are other technological changes, namely, changes in the means of communication, which have a contrary tendency. Anything of ordinary human interest that is said or done anywhere, a riot, a scandal, or a new face on the public stage, is known within a day to large sections of the population in many parts of the world. The infections of fear, hatred, and sympathy pass immediately across continents and may create new political alignments and solidarities within a week. What is called nationalism, in its new, extended forms outside Europe, is largely a reflection of this fact of instant communication, of resentment and solidarity between races and religions being transmitted more rapidly over a larger area than has ever been possible before. Since the first student protests after 1815, and the excitement across frontiers in 1848, we have moved into a period when students, or their equivalents, may be expected to be bubbling and protesting about their liberties in any part of the world at any time, in moods of enthusiasm which reinforce each other across any distance. In America itself, which shows the pattern of the future, one sometimes has the impression of

\* *Foreign Policy and the Democratic Process*. By MAX BELOFF, Oxford University Press. 15s.