

SELECTED NOTICES

The Wrong Set. By Angus Wilson. Secker & Warburg. 8s. 6d.

The satirist's is a bold role and not to be lightly adopted. He is beset by cunning enemies, and no writer needs so wary a perfection of equipment. If he falls he falls hard, never, perhaps, to rise again. For his readers are a vicious and unforgiving lot, and they will readily turn their malevolence from his victims to himself. He himself has stimulated their blood-lust, excited them to a baying frenzy, and he must never fail to deliver their victim neatly trussed and perforated. Perhaps we can most rewardingly compare him to a matador. Like the bull-fighter he must, in the first place, choose a worthy adversary. Retired colonels and bourgeois gentil hommes have become, in our own time, like scrawny or over-fed bulls whose despatch can excite only a bored indignation with their slayer. And even if the bull is fierce and formidable it will not do simply to attack him with a pole-axe. The rapier must be used, and must be used with superlative elegance.

Undoubtedly Mr. Angus Wilson has won his spurs in the bull-ring. His best encounters prove that a new star has risen on this depleted horizon, and the aficionados will certainly pay for their seats whenever he chooses to perform again. At times one is equally impressed by the formidable appearance of his bull and by the neatness with which he despatches it. *A Visit in Bad Taste* is a beautiful example of the toreador's art. Here we are presented with an almost admirable woman, sensibly liberal in her views, unsentimental, cultivated and sophisticated. But she is confronted by one of those testing situations which are like X-rays in their terrible penetrative powers. Her shady, vulgar and charmless brother has just been released after serving a prison sentence for indecent assault, and Margaret (a nicely chosen name) rids herself of this incubus with a cool reasonableness which is profoundly disgusting. There are other stories in this collection—*Crazy Crowd* and *Mother's Sense of Fun*, for example—in which Mr. Wilson exhibits the same adventurousness in his choice of victim, and the same graceful skill at the 'moment of truth'. He has to perfection that indispensable piece of equipment for the satirist, a sharp and retentive ear. Almost everywhere in this book the dialogue is evocative and devastating.

But Mr. Cockshott was growing restive, his face took on an expression of caricatured thoughtfulness and he bit on his pipe. "Of course, I might appear with no trousers at all," he said. "Aesthetically I should be perfectly justified, for I still have a very fine leg. Hygienically—well the weather is very warm and trousers are an undesirable encumbrance. Socially I make my own laws. I have only one hesitation and that is in the moral sphere. I have no doubt at all that the sight of my splendid limbs would cause Mrs. Brasher to become discontented with her own spouse's spindly shanks; and whilst I have the greatest contempt for that horsetoothed, henpecked gentleman, I have also the highest respect for the institution of marriage. No, I must remain a martyr to the cause of public morality." A chorus of laughter greeted this sally and Nan declared he was impossible, whilst Jenny dared him to carry out his threats. "Oh, do, Dads, do," she cried, "I'd so adore to see Mrs. Brasher's face . . ." All this is beautiful rapier work, and by the end of the story this facetious, whimsical,

false and deeply repulsive family lie neatly disembowelled around the ring. And when occasion requires it, Mr. Wilson can be most economically witty: "Is that one of Brock's nightly prowls?" asked Edwin. "No, darling," replied Monica, "not Brock and not nightly prowls. Just badgers drinking."

Yet Mr. Wilson is by no means uniformly successful and there are occasions when he does very badly indeed. His great fault is that he is far too careless as a writer. For example *Fresh Air Fiend*, an admirable story in so many ways, is very nearly ruined by its anecdotal ending. Here a last sentence hammers home the point of the story with a crashing thud: the pole-axe is suddenly brought out when the rapier should have already done its work. Mr. Wilson often seems so eager to come to grips with his adversary that he forgets to bother with his medium. A severe technical problem in writing a short story is to provide the necessary preliminary information with surreptitious tact. Mr. Wilson has no notion how to do this. In his long story, *Union Reunion*, he is faced with the necessity of explaining a number of complex family events and relationships which properly precede the theme of the story. His desperately crude method is to allow the characters to indulge in explanatory interior dialogues. 'Her other sisters-in-law kissed her and squeezed her arm and gave her confidences and she did not shrink back, but with Minnie it always seemed so false. Of course they had all felt that Minnie had tricked Bert into the marriage and Bert had been her favourite brother, but then it was all so long ago now, and Bert was dead.' Anything would be better than this clumsy sleight-of-hand, even a foreword in which the previous events and the present relationships were baldly summarized.

A similar error of discretion can be seen in Mr. Wilson's improvident use of proper names. No task should be more distasteful to the novelist or story-writer than the invention of names, for nothing so harshly emphasizes the clumsiness of his medium. Yet Mr. Wilson will happily throw in extra names at the very end of a story when they could have been avoided without any strain at all.

'Lois was doing her hair and Marjorie was in the bath when the telephone rang. They were dining in Soho with the Travises, but they had promised to look in at Mavis Wayne's party before dinner.'

The Travises and Mavis Wayne are a deplorable mistake, for their introduction makes an unnecessary and unsuccessful claim on our credulity. Presumably the intention is to convince us that the world of this short story is three-dimensional, peopled by a whole diverse community of characters who may or may not be mentioned. But the effect of these names is simply to tumble the whole tight little story into a sort of diffuse bathos.

It seemed important to insist on these weaknesses in Mr. Wilson's technical equipment. They can lead him at times into total errors. *Significant Experience* is a pointless little piece of false sophistication and the murder of the bull-finch at the end of *Raspberry Jam* is a gross and odious error of taste. There are also occasions when Mr. Wilson's bull smells as if it might have been killed many years ago. Yet the satirical talent of this writer is beyond all question. He must look carefully to his technical equipment and never allow himself to publish a story of which he has any doubts at all. In this field nothing but perfection will do, and Mr. Wilson has shown that he can achieve it.

PHILIP TOYNBEE

- The Voyage of Magellan.* By Laurie Lee. John Lehmann. 10s. 6d.
Selected Poems. By John Crowe Ransom. Eyre & Spottiswoode. 9s. 6d.
Poems 1920-45. By Allen Tate. Eyre & Spottiswoode. 10s. 6d.
The Dispossessed. By John Berryman. Wm. Sloane. Assoc. Inc. \$2.50.
The King of Asine. By George Seferis. John Lehmann. 10s. 6d.
The Age of Anxiety. By W. H. Auden. Faber & Faber. 8s. 6d.

'Readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts may be permitted to assume that title. It is desirable that such readers for their own sakes should not suffer the solitary word Poetry, a word of very disputed meaning, to stand in the way of their gratification; but that while they are perusing this book they should ask themselves if it contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents; and if the answer be favourable to the author's wishes, that they should consent to be pleased in spite of that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision.'

The preface to the original edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798, written 150 years ago, is not so well known as the prefaces to the 1800 and 1802 editions in which Wordsworth explored the sources of poetical inspiration. Catch-phrases taken from their context in these prefaces are well-known and imprint half-truths upon the mind, often the opposite of Wordsworth's intention. Let us look at another passage, from the 1802 preface:

'For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.'

As the mind, now, sinks into that savage state, so the pre-established codes of decision take firmer hold. In his essay upon *Tradition and the individual talent* Mr. T. S. Eliot added another dangerous catch-phrase 'significant emotion'. Let us look at the before and after:

'There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is an expression of *significant* emotion, which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet.'

You will remember the main thesis on the depersonalization of the artist; which has turned out to be a detrimental doctrine, since it has allowed the heresy that the literary experience of emotion is enough; that the reading and vocabulary of erotic books may substitute for the real experience of love, in the poet's history.

'Poetry is not the turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.'