

# REVIEW AND COMMENT

## Eliot, Auden, Isherwood and Cummings

*MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL*, by

T. S. Eliot. Harcourt, Brace. \$1.25.

*THE DOG BENEATH THE SKIN*, by

W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood.

Random House. \$1.50.

*TOM*, by E. E. Cummings. Arrow Editions.

\$3.

T. S. ELIOT has called the historical sense indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year. Its possession, like others that men spend a lifetime in accumulating, can be either an asset or a liability when the possessors find themselves placed, by time or circumstance, on the border of two worlds. In this situation the radical poet is less subject to embarrassment than the conservative. He is better prepared for the emergency to whose necessity he gives a comprehending consent; the situation both commits him to critical decision and stimulates his critical faculties. He must make up his mind which of the memories and ideas of earlier generations are valid for later ones (he would be a reckless fool if he threw away all his familiar cultural apparatus), and he has no time to dawdle away in enervating *folie de doute*. The conservative, on the other hand, finds that his very respect for tradition has, by the laws of dialectic, engendered a passion for originality. As these equally praiseworthy impulses are intensified, they subject the poet to increasing strain, and the pull of their conflicting forces tends to swing the poet into either stereotype or eccentricity, depending on the peculiar resistance offered by his nature to their attraction. The man who can take his tradition neat or leave it alone has all the advantage.

The genius of T. S. Eliot is neither stereotyped nor eccentric. He must be respected for what he has been, even if we are gravely suspicious of what he is or contemptuous of what he may become. In *Murder in the*

*Cathedral* he has inverted the usual operation of the historical sense and let his awareness of the doleful aspects of modern society inform his understanding of an earlier system in process of break-up. The action of this play occurs on two days, December 2 and December 29 of the year 1170, but we know this atmosphere:

Here is no continuing city, here is no abiding stay.

Ill the wind, ill the time, uncertain the profit, certain the danger.

O late late late, late is the time, late too late, and rotten the year;

Evil the wind, and bitter the sea, and grey the sky, grey grey grey.

We do not wish anything to happen.

Seven years we have lived quietly,

Succeeded in avoiding notice,

Living and partly living.

There have been oppression and luxury,

There have been poverty and license,

There has been minor injustice,

Yet we have gone on living,

Living and partly living.

But now a great fear is upon us, a fear not of one but of many,

A fear like birth and death, when we see birth and death alone

In a void apart. We

Are afraid in a fear which we cannot know, which we cannot face, which none understands,

And our hearts are torn from us, our brains unskinned like the layers of an onion, our selves are lost lost

In a final fear which none understands. . . .

And, by substituting terms, we might convert the drama's theological testimony to revolutionary significance; thus the sermon for Christmas Day could become an eulogy of Lenin or the contrast between the worldly prose of the Four Knights of Reaction and the final choral *Te Deum* of praise be construed as an omen of the ultimate triumph of life over death. It would take some doing, to be sure, and might not be worth the trouble, and no doubt would distort the pious purpose of Mr. Eliot, who may, for all that, still be an artist more honest than he prefers to admit. He had it once and he can hardly lose it all at once, no matter what ideas he may think he has in his head.

A brief comment on his method. He is up to his old trick of setting the magnificent against the commonplace, the chorus against the doggerel, ostensibly for ironical effect, and here, as before, is inclined to work the trick for all it is worth. There are some signs that it isn't worth as much as it used to be and its application is not always sure.

Can he write really sustained poetry? Or is this a mannerism which he exaggerates, as his power wanes to distract from his loss

of power, as an aging athlete parades his tricks, husbands his energy and tries to make his errors come when they will do the least damage? Is there not the danger of making things look better than they are, as a star actress augments the impression of her talents by surrounding herself with a retinue of hams? Eliot might be well advised to ask himself some pretty sharp questions about this performance.

Auden, of course, has borrowed particularly from Eliot, whom, like his other numerous creditors, he repays in banter and spoofing. It is nothing unheard of for satirists to pillory the class from which they spring; Auden, however, departs from the satirical tradition by not being a political Tory, and furthermore by writing as if it were fun. His historical sense of literature is keen and strong without being at all academic. In protecting himself against the infection of tradition he has, so to speak, adopted a method of inoculation and, by giving himself a series of deliberate injections, worked up quite an immunity. The result is equally fantastic and amusing. This, with the assistance of his friend Isherwood, he proceeds to demonstrate for us in the three act play entitled *The Dog Beneath the Skin, or Where is Francis?* It is good droll horsing, in allusions they will recognize, of the British upper class; and while there is some evidence of a tendency toward dangerous self-repetition, on the whole the book is an improvement over Auden's earlier work—in clarity over the poems, orations, diaries and charades; and in richness and exuberance over *The Dance of Death*. As in former works by Auden, the play documents the case histories of those pathological specimens "whose own slight gestures tell their doom with a subtlety quite foreign to the stage." But the text is more than horse-play and case-history; elsewhere Auden has made use of a definition of poetry as "memorable speech," and the stuff here has resonance and ring, a good hard sound to it; it bites and takes hold. Auden and Isherwood can not only kid. They can write.

The play's central theme, the search for the lost heir who has run away from his father's house and hidden beneath the skin of the dog, may be interpreted as an allegorical history of the artist in the latter days of imperialist break-up. The lords of empire had always regarded him as something of a son of a bitch, even though, as the military character puts it, "I'm bound to say while he was with me he was the best gun-dog I ever had." The missing heir, confronted with the necessity of accepting the nomination, undertakes to see people from under and realizes what a shock it

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consternation, and search for his whereabouts takes his pursuers into all sorts of improbable European purlieus, ranging from the brothels of Ostria, the lunatic areas of Westland (where The Leader has a loud speaker instead of a face), through the gardens of Paradise Park, "where most wasters and cranks wind up sooner or later" and a romantically erudite poet misquotes the classics, and the crass vulgarity of the Nineveh Hotel until the time comes for the disguise to be superseded by manifesto:

Since I've been away from you, I've come to understand you better. I don't hate you any more. I see how you fit into the whole scheme. You are significant, but not in the way I used to imagine. You are units in an immense army: most of you will die without ever knowing what your leaders are really fighting for or even that you are fighting at all. Well, I am going to be a unit in the army of the other side. . . .

and to a proclamation of the Vicar's blacklist, the General's curse and official unrecognition from the big-shot press, Francis, the missing heir, Alan, who has been searching for him and several newly-found companions come down from the stage and go out through the audience, while "the gestures and cries on the stage become more incoherent, bestial and fantastic, until at last all are drowned in deafening military chords."

As with Eliot, Auden and Isherwood put the finest poetic and prophetic writing into the choruses, which are by turns ominous or flippant, casual or imperative. The epilogue, ending on the line "To each his need: from each his power" is particularly fine; too long to quote in full, it cannot be divorced from what has gone before nor abbreviated by partial quotation without damaging its integral feeling. Perhaps an idea of the choral quality can be suggested by fragmentary selection from the verses which end Scene Four of Act III:

So, under the local images your blood has con-  
jured  
We show you man caught in the trap of his  
terror, destroying himself. . . .  
Do not speak of a change of heart, meaning five  
hundred a year, and a room of one's own  
As if that were all that is necessary. In these  
islands alone there are some forty-seven mil-  
lion hearts, each with four chambers. . . .  
Visit from house to house, from country to coun-  
try: consider the populations  
Beneath the communions and the coiffures: dis-  
cover your image.  
Man divided always and restless always: afraid  
and unable to forgive. . . .  
Beware of yourself:  
Have you not heard your own heart whisper 'I  
am the nicest person in this room'?

Asking to be introduced to someone real: someone  
unlike all those people over there? . . .  
You have wonderful hospitals and a few good  
schools:

Repent.

The precision of your instruments and the skill  
of your designers is unparalleled:

Unite.

Your knowledge and your power are capable of  
infinite extension:

Act.

Not the least interesting aspect of Auden's career has been his ability to work with others. This is a sign of sound artistic health and Eliot's general commentary on the point is worth repeating: "The second-rate artist, of course, cannot afford to surrender himself to any common action; for his chief task is the assertion of all the trifling differences which are his distinction: only the man who has so much to give that he can forget himself in his work can afford to collaborate, to exchange, to contribute."

Between them, Eliot and Auden have managed to hit off just about what is the matter with E. E. Cummings, whose sickly heart, however brave he was about it, has only too often told him he was the nicest person in the room. There is something

pathetic about a man whose disgust with authority forbids him acceptance of any system, whether of politics, punctuation or ideas. Even when Cummings' concealed ingenuity is most exasperating in asserting his pretensions to organized composition, we pity him for the constant embarrassment he must suffer in asking to be introduced to someone real. His own talent is real enough, but it has served only to fool him about himself. The poor fellow. He thinks that in writing *Tom*, a ballet based on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he has "fearlessly and completely challenged a partial and cowardly epoch." Actually, what he has done is wasted his time over a book of stage directions, no mean art, as Shakespeare and Shaw have proven, but—they also wrote the plays. Then what abuse of the adverbial parts of speech! It is time his best friend, or some one, should tell Cummings how he offends. For a man who knows much about writing to plop down into this swamp of squirmspurty pseudo-boyish squishiness illustrates—alas!—how a compassionate and generous talent can get itself mired, lacking analysis, in a search for respectable occupation, a principle of allegiance.

ROLFE HUMPHRIES.

## The Chinese Revolution

CHINA'S MILLIONS, by Anna Louise Strong. Introduction by John Cournos. The Knight Publishing Co. \$2.50.

WORKERS in Changsha, in April, 1927, when they learned that Chiang Kai-shek had made a deal with the Shanghai bankers and had suppressed the Shanghai labor unions, said to Anna Louise Strong, "The revolution is a moving train. At every station some get on and others get off. Chiang Kai-shek got off the train of the revolution."

There can be added to this shrewd comment what the succeeding years have shown, that events let no historical figure rest. When he got off the train of the revolution Chiang Kai-shek did not stand still, but began going backwards. Today, eight years after the triumphs had won him the trust and support of the Chinese masses, eight years after the unification of China seemed to have been achieved and the imperialist powers were giving way before the unity of the Chinese people, Chiang Kai-shek sees his power disintegrating. He sees the revolution re-arisen and gathering in might against him. The

Shanghai bankers cannot fight for him; the masses hate him; and the Japanese who have used him against his people now ignore him while they go about adding the northern provinces of China as a new puppet state to looted Manchuria.

The story of the disintegration of the Chinese Nationalist Party since the 1927 betrayal is told in the three chapters with which Anna Louise Strong brings up to date her vivid book on the Chinese National Revolution. These three chapters add much to the value of a book that has well deserved its high reputation. They show with startling incisiveness the consequences of a betrayal of the masses. They show political forces in action more clearly than any like period in recent history. First of all the revolution went on. It was not stopped. It could not be stopped. No fascist reaction was more unscrupulous than the Kuomintang reaction. But the revolution flowed under and around the reaction and gathered greater strength. The Soviet districts in China expand irresistibly. Secondly, political power needs a mass base. Bankers and landlords do not provide it. The Kuomintang grows weaker every day, facing the patient but unforgiving masses who wait their day and know it is coming as the Soviets advance. Thirdly, no imperialist power has ever stepped in to help without staying to help itself. Chiang Kai-shek, when he first accepted Japanese assistance against his own people, prepared for the seizure of Manchuria and for the new puppet state now being put together in Nor China.

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