

ells's criticism of American society here and in *Through the Eye of the Needle*, a sort of sequel which followed it many years later, is unsparing; yet, strange to say, even the most complacent reader is not incensed by it. He points out our condescending attitude toward all those who do domestic work, and our selfishness in considering the back elevator and artificial light good enough for them, while we ride in the front elevator and bask in the sunlight; he indicates the shameful condition of the New York police stations and the injustice of our treatment of convicts; he ridicules our amusements and our false social standards. As imaginary portrayals of an ideal country, these two books are delightful, and as such they should be judged, rather than as novels. Their satire, while pointed, is not bitter, and their mild humor and their closeness of observation give them the charm of a series of closely related familiar essays. Only an artist could have said so much that is radical in thought in a form that is so moderate and so pleasing. It is this moderation in the treatment of social problems, keeping them always within the realm of art, that will make Howells's novels live when many of the novels dealing more pointedly but less artistically with the same problems, will have had their day and ceased to be.

ALTHA LEAH BASS.

The Sacred Wood

The Sacred Wood, by T. S. Eliot. New York: A. A. Knopf.

IT is unlikely that Mr. T. S. Eliot's book of criticism will impress any large section of the public; for one thing, it chiefly deals with a period of English literature of which—in spite of a general profession of acquaintance—very few nowadays have a real and active knowledge: the Elizabethan period; another, more important reason is that Mr. Eliot has made a serious tactical error in not doing his utmost to eliminate the traces of a superior attitude. This is the more to be deplored because there are people prepared to read criticism of literature about which they know nothing, sometimes with the vague idea that an essay will save them the trouble of reading anything more, sometimes, more laudably, with the intention of sampling work to which the first approach is difficult for them. They will be either frightened or offended by Mr. Eliot's manner. It is a pity.

What is more curious, and much more reprehensible, is that the people who ought to take Mr. Eliot's criticism seriously—above all, the English literary critics,—have also behaved as though they were frightened or offended. They have given no sign that they appreciated the important fact that Mr. Eliot possesses a critical intelligence of a high order and a sensibility of an unusual kind; instead of attempting to elucidate a critical attitude that is as surely individual as any of our time, they have abused, misrepresented or ignored him. True, his manner is often unfortunate, portentous and disdainful; his actual writing often stiff and hidebound. But critics who know anything of their real business should be quick to forgive the second of these shortcomings when they realize that it is the direct result of an attempt to express some very subtle perceptions and expound some unfamiliar doctrines. That they have had no inkling—I speak, of course, only of English critics—of what Mr. Eliot is really trying to say; that they have praised him (in the few cases where he has been praised) even more ignorantly than they have blamed him is the most damning evidence I know of the general incompetence of English criticism at the present day.

Before making any attempt to criticize Mr. Eliot's criticism, I must endeavor to present—however inadequately—the main outlines of his thought. He begins with the assumption that a work of literary art is an object which arouses in an educated sensibility a peculiar emotion; but this emotion is not indescribable, as some theorists of the plastic arts hold, nor is it always the same. The main work of the critic is to elucidate the particular emotion aroused by a literary work, by an effort of comparison and analysis; his function is not to expound his own emotions, which may often be, quite legitimately, compounded of a hundred non-aesthetic responses, but to disengage and distinguish the precise emotion evoked by the object as a whole. As a corollary to this, but now regarding the work of literature from the angle of the artist, Mr. Eliot holds—following Remy de Gourmont—that the construction of the object essentially involves a depersonalization of emotion; in other words, a poem of the highest order is not in any ordinary sense of the phrase an expression of personal emotion, but something arranged, built and created in such a way that it must impress in its unique and determined fashion any unbiassed sensibility exposed to it. We must conceive of the writer less as one who speaks to us than as the carver of a solid thing which will compel us to react towards it in a certain way. An artist's seriousness—and this is a word which Mr. Eliot uses often in a sense that (in default of a definition) must be gleaned from his book as a whole—is measured by the degree to which he sacrifices all desire for immediate and unrestrained expression, all personal idiosyncrasy, to the impersonal task of building the solid object which is the work of literary art.

It is important to distinguish this doctrine from that of the French Parnassians, which is trivial in comparison. The Parnassian ideal was also an impersonal art; but the impersonal "beauty" at which they aimed was plastic in an obvious and uninteresting way. Hérédia is sculptural, certainly, but he is not solid; and the whole Parnassian movement may fairly be said to have been based on a misunderstanding of the metaphor employed when we speak of a work of art as solid or objective. The Parnassians imagined they made their poetry solid by describing solid objects (*Est-elle en marbre ou non, la Vénus de Milo?*); so, in prose, did most of the French realists. Mr. Eliot's doctrine is completely uncontaminated by this fallacy, and I think I should be doing him no injustice if I chose as an example of the impersonality of poetry of the highest order, *The Phoenix* and *The Turtle*. That neglected poem, which Mr. Eliot certainly admires, is animated by a profound emotion; it troubles depths within us. Yet we cannot form the least idea of the nature of the poet's own emotion. He has completely depersonalized himself, and the mysterious result is perhaps the most perfect poem in the English language.

It follows that, examined by the standard of this ideal, many writers to whom the critics—*tous les critiques*, *cela veut dire un critique copié par tous les autres*—are accustomed to award a high place, must be degraded to an inferior rank—a Wordsworth, for instance, falls abruptly. But this is an incidental result. The greater interest of the theory lies in some of Mr. Eliot's practical applications of it to critical problems. A fairly clear consequence of the theory is that pure works of literature, or the pure portions of impure works, may produce in us emotional responses of a very varied kind; for though our judgment that a work is pure must in the last resort depend upon the reactions of our sensibility, our sensibility may reasonably be expected to discriminate between a reaction to a general

coherence and impersonal solidity and a reaction to particular kinds of coherence and solidity. One solid work of literature may arouse and satisfy far more complex emotional needs in ourselves than another equally solid. The aim of criticism should therefore be twofold: first, to inquire and establish the degree of artistic perfection in a given work, the extent to which the author's personal emotion has been transformed and depersonalized; second, to elucidate and describe the peculiar quality of the work in so far as it is perfect.

The most striking practical application of his methods and principles that Mr. Eliot's book contains is his attempt to grapple with the problem of what we loosely call "comic creation." The only form in which this problem (which should be one of the most fundamental for English criticism) ever reaches the consciousness of the ordinary critic is the problem of Dickens. Mr. Chesterton once made an interesting beginning of an attempt to define the nature of Dickens's achievement in creating his comic characters; but the effort dwindled away in a desert of verbal paradox. Still, seeing that very few critics are aware that Dickens presents any problem at all, we may at least gratefully acknowledge Mr. Chesterton's superior awareness. Mr. Eliot approaches the problem in its primary form, as it occurs in Elizabethan literature. He discerns the close affinity between Marlowe's creation of character and Ben Jonson's. (It is true that it only needs to be pointed out to be recognized; but no one, so far as I am aware, pointed it out before Mr. Eliot, probably because Marlowe is generally supposed to have written tragedies and Jonson comedies.) The common element of their creation is something which really repels the epithets of tragic and comic alike; it is an element for which language has no precise name, a kind of savage caricature. The great characters of Dickens, as Mr. Eliot observes, belong to the same family: Squeers, for instance, is not comic, nor tragic, nor a figure of satire. In his brilliant essay on Ben Jonson's "art of the superfluities" Mr. Eliot has definitely advanced criticism; we have a problem of primary importance disengaged for the first time. In literary criticism to disengage a problem is to solve it.

This is not the occasion to discuss questions which seem to be, though they are not, incidental, such as the inquiry into the handling of blank verse by the various Elizabethan dramatists, an inquiry to which Mr. Eliot gives us at least some interesting prolegomena, though some of his exact contentions are dubious. Unfortunately it is the general habit to regard such inquiries as pedantic, although if they are rightly conducted their value for present literary creation is no less than their fascination. It is a thousand pities that Mr. Eliot has not the leisure to pursue his investigations, for it is in his handling of these matters that we come into contact with the element in his criticism which is, to my own mind, the most suggestive of all. His criticism is *positive*; he not only conceives but exercises it as an adjunct and an aid to creation. I do not mean that it is what is commonly called "creative criticism," the activity by which a writer gives a loose rein to all the irrelevant emotions aroused in him by a work of literature, and—in Mr. Eliot's illuminating and rather contemptuous phrase—"indulges a suppressed creative wish." It is rather the opposite of this; a criticism which is directed towards a complete exploration of the work of literature with a view to mastering its mechanism. The man who is lyrical about a 100,000 H. P. turbine helps neither himself nor us to make one, though he may make a number of

people believe that they ought to admire it. Mr. Eliot's underlying purpose is to help himself write poetry, not in the form of criticism, but in the form of poetry. Inevitably he has obeyed the law formulated by Remy de Gourmont: "Every man who is sincere attempts to make universal laws of his personal impressions," and often in his book he posits as absolute a critical attitude that is, after all, only relative. I think, for instance, that there is a far better case to be made out for the psychological or biographical critic than Mr. Eliot allows; but that—by the same argument—may be because I myself am rather addicted to psychological criticism.

Critics, like poets, are to be judged by their practice and not their theories. It is perfectly easy for the logic-chopper to knock holes into any aesthetic theory that yields good results in the hands of the critic who devised it; while the theory that is proof against logical attack is inevitably worthless as a practical instrument. The real use of a formulated theory is to help us to understand a critic's practice. It is not worth while, therefore, to deliver a frontal attack on Mr. Eliot's premises and to ask *why* the conception of a work of literary art should be so rigorously restricted; *why* he has so unhesitatingly followed Remy de Gourmont in this matter; *why* he is not made uneasy by his necessary conclusion that "England has produced a prodigious number of men of genius and comparatively few works of art"; and *why* he himself has shirked the task of doing what he wishes Matthew Arnold had done, namely, "to show his contemporaries *exactly why* the author of Amos Barton is a more serious writer than Dickens, and why the author of La Chartreuse de Parme is more serious than either." I for one should have liked it better had Mr. Eliot made his postulates quite explicit; he would at least have added a grace of form to a work of rigorous critical analysis.

However, it would not have helped Mr. Eliot to fair play. He has been attacked by his critical colleagues in England in ways which only show that they are completely unable to grasp his conceptions or his methods. It is easy to make cheap fun of a man who is taking extreme pains to elucidate a subtle thought; it is much harder to understand him. There is a great deal in Mr. Eliot's criticism with which I do not wholly agree, and more that irritates me in spite of my own agreement; but I am convinced that there is only one modern book of poetical criticism that compares with it for suggestiveness, and that is the Poet Laureate's Milton's Prosody. These very different books have in common a rare distinction: they both approach poetry as a *poiësis*; they are in an exact sense, "creative criticism."

JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY.

Knut Hamsun: From Hunger to Harvest

BETWEEN Hunger and The Growth of the Soil lies the time generally allotted to a generation, but at first glance the two books seem much farther apart. One expresses the passionate revolt of a homeless wanderer against the conventional routine of modern life. The other celebrates a root-fast existence bounded in every direction by monotonous chores. The issuance of two such books from the same pen suggests to the superficial view a complete reversal of position. The truth, however, is that Hamsun