

## T. S. Eliot and Totalitarianism

*THE IDEA OF A CHRISTIAN SOCIETY.* By T. S. Eliot. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1940. 104 pp. \$1.50.

Reviewed by JOSEPH RATNER

FINE feathers may make fine birds; but ideas are not birds, and a vulturous idea decked out in dove's words is still a vulture and not a dove. Mr. Eliot must know this, for he takes such consistently good care *not* to tell us, in his overt exposition, what on earth his "idea" of a Christian Society specifically is. His formal argument is as astute an arrangement of fine words in alluring design, vacuously simulating the appearances of thought, as one could rationally expect to come across outside the products of authentic and immedicable hallucination. But Mr. Eliot himself, fortunately for us, is not endowed with miraculous infallibility, and so it is possible for the reader to eke out, by piecing together incidental and scattered remarks, a definite picture of the society Mr. Eliot wants to see fastened upon the whole human race.

Mr. Eliot wants a society in which Church and State are not two separate institutions but are welded together into one—with the primacy or dominance of the Church fixed and unassailable. This is his fundamental—the establishment of a Theocratic State. But he does not call it by this old-fashioned and plainly understood name; his argument nebulously ambulates with "the religious-social nature of society." Overtly he says, "in speaking of Church and State it is the Anglican Church that I have in mind." But the actual model on which his ideal "idea" is patterned is to be found in Germany: "the tendency of totalitarianism is to re-affirm, on a lower level, the religious-social nature of society." Present-day (March 1939) England is still infected with Liberalism, which is not a political philosophy but a kind of disease, for it tends "to relax, rather than to fortify. It is a movement not so much defined by its end, as by its starting point; away from, rather than towards, something definite." Hence Mr. Eliot righteously castigates England, the United States, and the Dominions, and defends Germany from their criticisms. (For reasons unknown to me he does not once speak of Italy, although he does mention Russia two or three times.) Our "objections to oppression and violence and cruelty"? Don't get unChristianly excited: "however

strongly we feel, these are objections to means and not to ends."

And it is "ends" that distinguish Mr. Eliot's "Christian Society." The Fixed and Ultimate Ends. "The Christian attitude towards peace, happiness, and well-being of peoples is that they are a means and not an end in themselves . . . morality is a means and not an end. The Church exists for the glory of God and the sanctification of souls." This is what Mr. Eliot's "Christian [Fascist] Society" will exist for: the preparation of "souls" for life in the next world and to hell with human beings in this. "The Church has perpetually to answer this question: to what purpose were we born? What is the end of Man?"

Bless you, if you are or are to become a Real Christian don't confuse



T. S. Eliot

*Elliott & Fry*

yourselves with questions of morality—mere means—think and work only for The End. And of course be always prepared to fight—i.e. to kill others—for the Sublime Realization of The End. "The idea of a Christian society seems incompatible with the idea of absolute pacificism . . . if I share the guilt of my society in time of 'peace,' I do not see how I can absolve myself from it in time of war, by abstaining from the common action." Jesus Christ was all wrong. The True and Ultimate Christian Injunction is this: since you have sinned already go and sin some more. In Mr. Eliot's Christian Society there will never be lacking multitudes of occasions for fulfilling this injunction with fire and sword internationally, and with the methods of the Grand Inquisitors intranationally. For details see his book.

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## Poet and Botanist

*THREE ACRES AND A MILL.* By Robert Gathorne-Hardy. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1939. 361 pp. \$4.

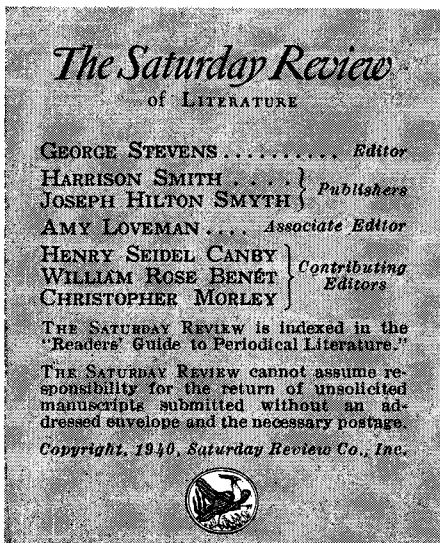
Reviewed by DONALD CULROSS PEATTIE

IT is a toss-up whether you will be reading this review under the classification of garden books, belles-lettres, or travels. Or, quite possibly, autobiography. But the ladies of The Garden Club of America who read this book for its undoubtedly valuable hints on rock gardening with arctic-alpine flowers are going to get a dreadful shock when the author quotes an Iceland-lander's query into his sex life. I'm not sure that the ladies can ever love their Iceland poppies quite so thoughtlessly again. But those who enjoy the aristocratic suavity of the author (who goes to Iceland with a monocle in his eye) for his resemblance to the hero of a Somerset Maugham story, will come up repeatedly against such dramatic climaxes as this:

"'Good God!' I said. 'That's *Campanula cenisia*!' And I might have added, had I been in a didactic mood, one of the most beautiful of western high-alpine campanulas, and that it was by no means common."

The author is stated to be a poet and a botanist, and he certainly sees the world like a poet. As a botanist he is that unusual and, I think, valuable kind, a genuine flower-worshipper. This poet-gardener's strictly botanical experiences in northern Spain, the Alps, Provence, the Canary Islands, and Iceland, in search of wild flowers for naturalization on his three English acres, will seem important or delightful only to some gardeners and some botanists. Human beings, however, pleasant scenes, random reflections, are stirred into this green salad.

A strange, a haunting nostalgia of Europe on the verge of destruction creeps into these pages, a feeling I have experienced myself while lying in a high meadow of the Maritime Alps, among bluebells and campion, listening to the drone of the army planes overhead, looking at the forts across the frontier through my glasses, seeing swart African troops dragging machine guns up through European deciduous forests. Somehow, in spite of all his dilettantism, in spite of his monocle and his mill—which isn't a mill anymore but a sort of scenic property like the one in Marie Antoinette's village—in spite of the fact that I don't care so much for arctic-alpines in gardens as in the arctic and on alps, the poet often caught me by the buttonhole. I don't think he is yet quite fused with the botanist, but both men are interesting.



### "Lice of Literature"

IN a pamphlet entitled "Reviewing,"\* Virginia Woolf issues a modest proposal for the abolition of that enterprise, in so far as it is applied to imaginative literature. Her arguments are familiar. "Hamlet" and "Paradise Lost" rode to fame without benefit of reviews, on "criticism conveyed by word of mouth." Reviews had a "notorious" effect on sensitive writers like Keats and Tennyson. A review stopped the sale of "Henry Esmond" (how temporarily, Mrs. Woolf does not even imply). She quotes Dickens: "How can a man like Macready fret and fume and chafe himself for such lice of literature as these?"—the lice being reviewers.

The argument proceeds: cheap printing resulted not only in more books, but—towards the middle of the nineteenth century—in a great exfoliation of reviewing. Reviews became more numerous, shorter, and more timely, with the result that reviewing and literary criticism became two entirely separate categories. And with the further result that reviewing lost its value for the three classes of people concerned: authors, readers, and publishers. Reviewing is valueless because of its "variety and diversity of opinion." "Praise cancels blame, and blame praise." Both become worthless to the author, and unconvincing to the reader; and if readers no longer take the advice of reviewers, the effect of reviewing on publishers' sales disappears.

At this point Mrs. Woolf abandons the consideration of the reader in relation to the reviewer, and proceeds to suggest that public reviewing be superseded by a system of commercial consultation between authors and reviewers in private. Such a system might bring the benefits of professional advice and opinion to authors who could profit by it, and the extraneous effects of reviews upon authors' public repu-

tations would be removed. For the public, the newspapers could devise a code of symbols—asterisks, daggers, and other typographical devices—to indicate recommendations without waste of verbiage; the saving of space might provide an opportunity to publish genuine criticism.

The answer to this is partially supplied by Leonard Woolf in his *Afterword*. Mr. Woolf saves other commentators the trouble of pointing out that reviews are written for readers, and that their effect upon authors is irrelevant; if an author occasionally derives a valuable suggestion from a review, that is *lagniappe*. He also maintains—as we do—that the effect of reviews on readers is by no means undermined by "variety and diversity of opinion." "To assume that . . . the art of reviewing is easy and mechanical is a complete misapprehension. . . . Reviewing is a highly skilled profession. . . . The fact that in the exceptional cases in which the book reviewed may have some claims to be a new work of art two reviewers may sometimes take diametrically opposite views is really irrelevant and does not alter the fact that the vast majority of reviews do give an accurate and often interesting account of the book reviewed."

Mr. Woolf does not exhaust the rebuttal, and a few words of elaboration are perhaps appropriate. In the first place, it is, to say the least, a novelty to find Virginia Woolf implying that opinions are valueless when they are not unanimous. The "variety and diversity" in which "praise cancels blame" actually give evidence not only of the obvious multiplicity of human tastes, but of the honesty of reviewing. Mrs. Woolf seems to think that readers of reviews must either take them as gospel or reject them altogether. What actually happens is that constant readers of reviews follow a certain reviewer or a certain publication to the point of knowing more or less where their own tastes are likely to diverge from those of the reviewer or the publication. Readers of reviews are plentifully supplied with grains of salt. This does not mean that reviews do not sell books, it means that the effect of reviews upon the sales of books is complicated and usually incalculable; sometimes a single review will be highly effective, sometimes a chorus of praise will produce no results.

In the second place, Mrs. Woolf specifically exempts the reviewer of non-imaginative literature—of history, politics, and economics—from her strictures. Why? Surely there is as much diversity of opinion among reviewers of history, politics, and economics as among reviewers of poetry, fiction, and drama. Indeed, during the last ten years, when historical, political, and economic dogmas have had such vociferous literary champions, the most

spectacular cat fights among reviewers have been in precisely these categories. If "variety and diversity of opinion" vitiate the reviewing of imaginative literature, why do they not also render valueless the reviewing of history, politics, and economics—where facts are so much more important? Mrs. Woolf does not explain.

In the third place, Mrs. Woolf's suggestion that reviewers metamorphose themselves into private consultants is superfluous. This is the function of editors; in many publishing houses, it is a function admirably fulfilled, and it includes the ability to discriminate among authors who will profit by advice, authors who never need advice, and authors who resent advice.

In the fourth and last place, Mrs. Woolf's implication that bad reviewing drives out good criticism is unsubstantiated. It is also left more or less uncontradicted by Mr. Woolf, who merely observes that "the public" does not want literary criticism. We disagree with both of them. The concept of "the public" is meaningless; certainly it is the experience of this magazine that a substantial number of readers do want literary criticism. The difficulty arises over specific articles, which the authors may regard as good literary criticism and the editors as pedantry, or others which the editors may regard as good literary criticism and the subscribers as pretentious and empty. Such "diversity of opinion" is unavoidable. But there is no more reason why reviewing and criticism cannot exist side by side than there is why journalism and literature cannot exist side by side. Obviously they do.

## Problem of Immortality

BY THEODORE SPENCER

IF the call comes, who answers?  
If the answer comes, who calls?

Over and over again,  
Once, once forever,  
Disintegrate the clever  
Hand and heart and brain.  
Bones, once hurried about  
By competent muscle and mind,  
Now to slack air refined,  
Ravel the question out.  
What language can tell why?  
What final voice resounds  
Without (within?) the bounds  
Of the irreparable "I"?  
Into what wrath of light,  
Beneath what boon of dark,  
Shudders the anguished spark  
When day and night are night?

If the call comes, who answers?  
If the answer comes, who calls?

\*REVIEWING. By Virginia Woolf. With a note by Leonard Woolf. London: The Hogarth Press, 1939. 31 pp. 6d.