

The Limits of Contemporary Criticism

HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

ALTHOUGH the last quarter of a century has seen the writing of a rich and varied library of essays about literature and literary methods, it is astonishing how little of what passes for literary criticism in the United States has to do with literature itself. Our critics tend to polarize around two extremes. At the one end there has been a great deal written about the relations of literature to society, the most advanced manifestation of which has been the development of Marxian criticism in the United States. At the other end there have developed an attitude and a theory which have concerned the mechanisms of literature rather than literature itself—literature as metaphor, literature as psychological revelation, literature as meaning, even—and I do not refer to Mr. I. A. Richards—literature as the meaning of meaning.

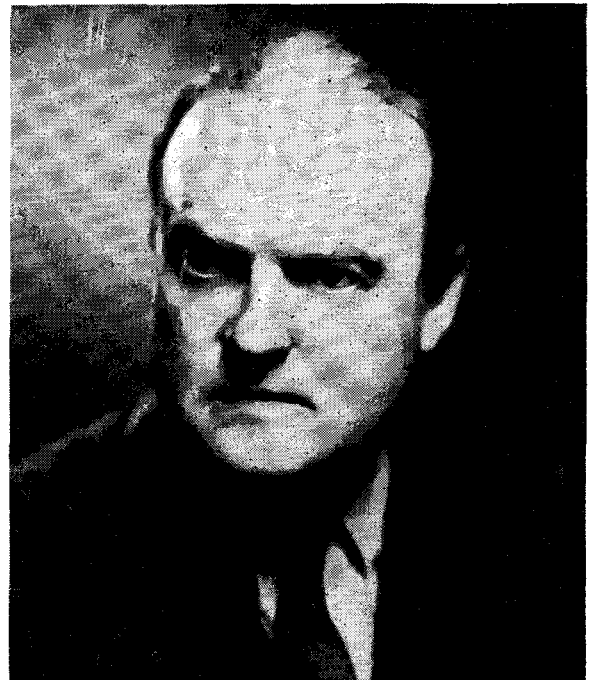
Much of this writing has been valuable and some of it has been brilliant. Much of it also has been tendentious, and a good deal of it seems to me to represent motion without progress. It is doubtless useful for a certain kind of literary technician to be made aware of unsuspected ambiguities lurking beneath the fair surface of the English language, but inasmuch as books are made for men, not men for books, the weakness of the introspective and analytical schools of criticism has been the disproportionate emphasis they have laid upon literary and linguistic technology. If we put the writings of, let us say, Mr. R. P. Blackmur alongside the prose and poetry of Carl Sandburg, we see at once that Mr. Blackmur dwells in what I may call a private world of his own, whereas Mr. Carl Sandburg dwells in a public world accessible to anyone who can read. I do not mean any disrespect to Mr. Blackmur or to others like him when I say that if the business of literature is to befriend those who would live in the spirit, as Arnold said, Mr. Sandburg is at the moment more useful than the *Kenyon Review*. And if the business of litera-

ture is not in this sense to be useful, literature is likely to degenerate into an elaborate private game played with infinite relish by a selected few, but a game without general significance to the United States.

On the other hand, it must be conceded that much literary criticism—say that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—had as its characteristic weakness the failure to recognize that the production and distribution of books are a social phenomenon. The artist, whether he admits it or not, writes for an audience and in so doing is influenced by the audience to which his writing is addressed. The author, though he may seem to shake off their influence, is the product in some measure of time and space, of society and solitude, of economic pressure and social prestige, and not to recognize these influences is not to interpret literature. But Marxian criticism (at least with us) has usually been more concerned with party correctness than with literary felicity; the Marxist critics have on the whole failed to maintain the generous breadth of Hazlitt, who, though he denounced the ideas of Burke, declared that the great conservative was one of the masters of English prose; and the relations of literature to society, the tentacles and filaments which unite genius to the social order are of a complexity and a delicacy far beyond the naive assumptions of Marxian literary theory.

The chief weakness of the lively writing about literature which has been done in the last two or three decades seems to me, at least, to be its failure to solve the philosophic problem. It has given

us some brilliant explications of the literary process, whether from without or from within, but it has mainly failed to show why literature is an ethical good, or, if one prefers, what literature is good for. Possibly the sterile fanaticism of the American humanists drove better minds away from the problem of relating the beautiful and the good, on the theory that goodness which destroyed beauty was not worth cultivating. Our critical writers, however, though they may quote Coleridge, do not see that the vitality of Coleridge has something to do with Coleridge's achievement in the realm of general ideas. They are too content with particular ideas, with ideas *ad hoc*. This can easily be shown. Suppose one were to make an anthology of those critical essays which have really altered the stream of literature—what American essays could one include? Who is the American equivalent of, let us say, Lessing or Renan? The name of Mr. T. S. Eliot



Edmund Wilson's "breadth of critical judgment sticks the more fiery off."

at once occurs. As I do not wish here to argue whether Mr. Eliot is or is not a derivative rather than a primary mind, I will say only two things: first, in the American situation, the ideas of a royalist, a conservative, and a Catholic cannot truly help us who are trying to protect and defend democratic culture, and I point to Mr. Eliot's essay on a Christian society as evidence of the dangers lurking in Mr. Eliot's general view of things; and second, even if Mr. Eliot is as primary and original as Mr. Eliot's followers believe him to be, the ancient adage that one swallow does not make a summer is pertinent. Moreover, our problem is an American problem—a problem in American culture—and Mr. Eliot has long since ceased to interest himself in this phase of the relation of the beautiful and the good. The ideas of a man like the late E. A. Robinson, who did not pretend to be a literary theorist, are, it seems to me, more pertinent to the problem of American culture than the ideas of the author of "Essays Ancient and Modern."

Whether I am right about Mr. Eliot or whether I am wrong, it seems clear that we in this country have taken up literature as sociology or as technical achievement, but we have mostly abandoned literary criticism as philosophic truth, at least in the sense in which Lessing and Schiller and Coleridge are philosophic critics.

IT is illuminating in this connection to compare the critical writing of the last quarter of a century with the critical writing done in that much despised era, the period of the genteel tradition. I refer specifically to the critical essays of men like Stedman, Woodberry, Brander Matthews, Mabie, Higginson, and their contemporaries. At first glance the comparison seems idle. We tall fellows have force, range, variety, "sophistication," and a snappy style, whereas books like Stedman's "Victorian Poets" or Woodberry's "Heart of Man" essays have only the faded life of an old photograph. But Mr. Lewis Mumford in his "The Brown Decades" taught us, or should have taught us, how superficial our dismissal of the later nineteenth century has been; and it begins to occur to the impartial explorer of the critical literature written before World War I that, whatever their stylistic monotony or lack of intellectual vigor may have been, the critics of those earlier decades at least had the right aim in view. For them literature was an end in itself, not a means towards something else. Their weakness was flaccidity, a superficial solution of a complex problem. But at

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THE SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE, published weekly by the Saturday Review Company, Inc., 25 West 45th Street, New York, N. Y. Harrison Smith, President; James Nelson, Vice-President and Treasurer; Amy Loveman, Secretary; Georges Dilks, Business Manager. Subscription, \$4 a year; \$4.50 in Canada; \$5 in other countries. At least 3 weeks' notice required for changes of address; both old and new addresses must be given. Printed in U. S. A. Vol. XXIV, No. 20, September 6, 1941. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. THE SATURDAY REVIEW is indexed in the "Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature."

least they looked upon literary art as autonomous. It is curious, even startling to list the contemporary critics who, in place of regarding literature as an autonomous realm of thought and spiritual activity, are not satisfied unless they can show that literature is a form of social action, an instrument of psychological release, an ingenious new language, or a complex cross-word puzzle something like those which appear weekly in *The Saturday Review of Literature*. The language and the units are "literary," but the process exists as a challenge to intellectual ingenuity.

The literary criticism of Mr. Edmund Wilson* has been done in a period when the critic has been subjected to enormous pressures designed to turn him away from the autonomy of literature to politics, sociology, psychology, or reform. Mr. Wilson has not always resisted these pressures, nor is it to be expected that he should do so. The book preceding "The Wound and the Bow" was, for example, a book about Marx, his contemporaries, and his followers. These pressures, moreover, have gone to the shaping of the present compilation and may account for the uneven merit of the seven essays contained in the volume. Nevertheless, Mr. Wilson seems to me to be a critic who has avoided more pitfalls than most have done, and he is, I think, the best balanced critic of our day.

Some of the essays in "The Wound and the Bow," to be sure, negate what I have just said. The essay on Casanova seems to me both dull and a make-weight. What is more astonishing, two others offend by their cavalier endings. Despite the importance which Mr. Wilson gives the later work of Dickens in the opening essay, he publishes a piece entitled "Justice to Edith Wharton," in which he blandly says he has read none of Mrs. Wharton's later novels (not even "Hudson River Bracketed!") and yet he flatly condemns everything about them. He publishes an essay on Hemingway in which "For Whom the Bell Tolls" is discussed as an after-thought in a penultimate paragraph. This is not good manners. The total production of these authors is supposed to be under responsible survey, and the public is entitled to Mr. Wilson's considered opinion. Finally, to my way of thinking, the essay on the "Philoctetes" of Sophocles (it is from this that the title of the volume comes) falls into the trap of modernism into which the brilliant Sir Gilbert Murray has led a good many commentators

*THE WOUND AND THE BOW: Seven Studies in Literature. By Edmund Wilson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1941. 296 pp. \$3.

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The Charm of J.M.B.

BARRIE: THE STORY OF J. M. B. By Denis Mackail. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1941. 736 pp. \$3.75.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

BARRIE was sixty-two years old. He was the most successful living British playwright; in the past he had been one of the most popular authors of novels, stories, sketches. He had innumerable and a few faithful friends. He owed more than nine-tenths of his fame and fortune to his own genius, industry, obstinacy, and charm. So much on one side. On the other his marriage had been shattered, after fifteen years, some twelve years earlier, and his pride was irreparably wounded; his greatest woman friend, the mother of the boys he adopted, had first seen her husband die in agony and had then, two years later, died too suddenly and painfully herself. One of these boys had been killed in the war, and then the best-loved Michael Davies, was drowned in the Thames while he was a student at Oxford.

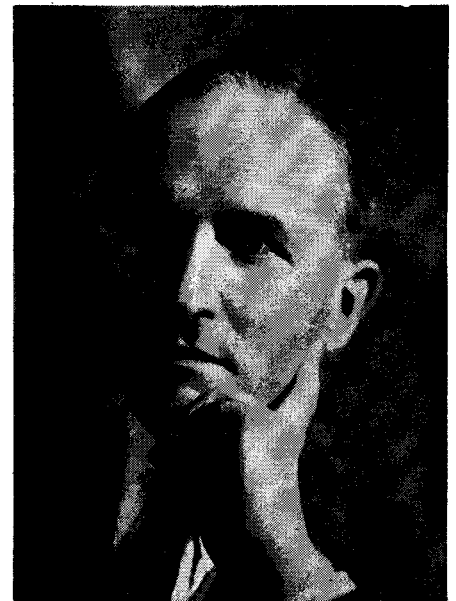
That shock came near to unsettling Barrie's reason; only the devotion, the strength, and the wisdom of one woman, Cynthia Asquith, his friend and secretary, and the devotion of those few friends who loved him not in spite, but because of, his strange character, loved him in spite as well as because of his charm, gave him his balance again. A year after Michael's death, Barrie wrote in a book of notes dedicated to the boy, "It is as if long after writing 'Peter Pan' it's true meaning came to me. Desperate efforts to grow up but can't."

It would be hard at any time to write the biography of such a man. To write it now, when so many are alive whose susceptibilities might be wounded is doubly hard; harder, again, for a biographer who knew Barrie from his own childhood, and is a friend of some of the most important people concerned. To do this demands not only great skill, but a tact scarcely second to Barrie's own when he was giving comfort to the wounded or the aggrieved. Mr. Mackail has succeeded. And I say that, having started with some prejudice against the book. It is very long—over seven hundred pages of some four hundred words each. I disliked its opening, an etching, in the novelist's manner, of a night in the familiar rooms in Adelphi Terrace. And I had a suspicion at first that Mr. Mackail in certain moods and at certain moments, belonged to a class of critics who infuriate me by a lack of justice. As a person, as a writer, Barrie relied all his life on a charm so miraculous that I know no parallel to

it. It was a charm like that magic sword which could behead a man so deftly that the victim never knew he had been touched, until he shook himself. To the charm of the man, to the charm of the author hundreds of thousands were victims. Then a few, friends of the man, devotees of the author, recovered from the spell and blamed Barrie because they had ever been under it. There are pages in which Mr. Mackail seems inclined to practise this injustice; but long before the book's end, he is free from that suspicion.

What a story he has to tell! A story of impudence, of courage, of pertinacity, of generosity, of friendship. So far as I can judge, he leaves little out. I wish he had told the story of Daniel O'Connor and the Peter Pan Book—how Barrie gave away a property in which any ordinary man with ordinary care could have found a living. But O'Connor was not an ordinary man.

It would be too much to say that Mr. Mackail succeeds in explaining Barrie's character. Perhaps only Barrie could do that, and he has left us an invaluable guide in "Sentimental Tommy." It is easy to say that he looked for a mother, his mother, in all women; and that even his admiration for his "heroes," George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, R. L. Stevenson, General Freyberg, Scott of the Antarctic, was the adoration of a child for a mother. That what he missed in his wife was a motherly feeling towards himself. But how then explain his paternal, avuncular, fraternal love for small boys, and more rarely little girls? Or his attachment, as natural and masculine as possible, to Gilmour, to Quiller-Couch, to Marriott-Watson, to Whibley?



Denis Mackail: "What a story he has to tell!"

In a brief review I can only throw out a suggestion. J. M. Barrie, bewitched by the theatre from his teens, was never quite sure that the stage was legitimate, could never cease dramatizing himself, and wavered, in horrid doubt, between the parts for which he cast himself, and that other self, which miscast, misdirected, and so often misrepresented him.

His Scotch blood, his religious background prevented him from ever being truly at home in the theatre: so he took the theatre home with him, and over and over again found his sincerest emotions, his deepest convictions spoiled by the lime-light, broken by self-consciousness. He was not Peter Pan. He was not the Boy who never grew up. He grew up: he could not find in his script any stage directions, any lines to express that abandonment of adolescence.

Before the Big Test

SHADOW OF WINGS. By Stella Morton. New York: Harper & Bros. 1941. 351 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by REBECCA LOWRIE

THERE is a good deal of quiet charm and humor in this story of an English family in the year before the war. John Manners, a veteran of the last war, scants out a living for his wife and five children, writing mystery stories—the "big novel" postponed by the need of ready cash. Caro, his wife has dedicated her talent for the violin to the same ends. So when the story opens they are two grey, work-worn people, loving each other still, devoted to the children and as remote from them as they are from

their own youth. Each child has a problem, and is a problem: Tony the eldest is in the R.A.F.; Judith is involved in a wretched love affair with a married man; Jason, the artist is cooped up in a bank; Virginia's marriage is losing its initial sheen, and Tim, the youngest, is a long-legged colt, acutely sensitive to the unrest of his brothers and sisters but inarticulate about it. Miss Morton brings all these people to life with understanding and skill. Not all of the problems are neatly solved, but one is left with the feeling that these are some of the English men and women who later on could stand up to a heroic test, because they met lesser tests with courage and intelligence.