

Labyrinthine Recesses of Satire

"Jonathan Swift," by John Middleton Murry (Noonday Press. 508 pp. \$6), is described by its author, the distinguished British critic, as "a critical biography." Professor John M. Bullitt of Harvard University, who reviews it here, is the author of *"Jonathan Swift and the Anatomy of Satire."*

By John M. Bullitt

WHEN Lemuel Gulliver visited Glubbubdrib, the Island of Sorcerers, he was permitted to call up from among the shades of the underground Homer and Aristotle as well as their commentators. Gulliver soon found that the two authors did not recognize their critics who, in the lower world, kept their distance out of a sense of shame and guilt for "having so horribly misrepresented the meaning of those authors to posterity." It would be equally instructive to know Swift's opinion of the many biographers and critics who have tried to trace the mazes of his complex personality and define with precision the significance of his artistry. How John Middleton Murry would fare when confronted by the shade of Swift is a moot point; but



Swift—"drama within himself."

the reader of his study of Swift's life and work, *"Jonathan Swift: A Critical Biography,"* will be impressed by the fact that more, perhaps, than any previous biographer he has attempted to give a full and complete image of the man, both in his external doings and in his labyrinthine recesses.

Dr. Johnson's opinion that the superiority of biography to other literary forms is due to its greater capacity to "enchain the heart by irresistible interest" has a powerful illustration in this study of Swift. Mr. Murry is not content with giving a routine statement of events arranged in chronological order; his principal concern is to discover the underlying motives in Swift's life, to dissect his personality, and through this process to clarify uncertainties about his relations with the world and to reassess his writings. It is an ambitious attempt, and the result is an impressive essay. The book is written in a tone of almost urgent conviction, and it is remarkable throughout for its vigorous independence of judgment, its boldness of psychological interpretation, and, above all, for its sense of immediacy.

But while the reader's imagination is fired by this dissection of the human heart, his reason may ask if the heart is truly that of Swift. Mr. Murry speaks with certitude about reactions and events which more cautious scholars have agreed, with the same evidence before them, could not be finally determined. The "real motive of Swift's paradoxical behaviour" can not be demonstrated simply by a biographer's tone of conviction. "Why did he not marry Stella [except in name only]? . . . It is simple enough. It was because of his rejection by Varina." The evidence for this simple solution is no more substantial than for several other interpretations. Mr. Murry is convinced that Stella and Swift went through a marriage ceremony, but he offers no new evidence, and what evidence is available is inconclusive. The further argument that "the marriage seems necessary to account for the subsequent catastrophe in the relations of Swift and Vanessa" suggests the dangers inherent in the psychological method of deducing facts. But if psychology is to be the tool, then surely one must answer such questions, posed by R. K. Root, as whether it fits the character of Dr. Ashe, the Bishop of Clogher, to



THE AUTHOR: The lean, dark, troubled countenance of John Middleton Murry has been at the center of so much literary and personal controversy that he has been called "the best hated man in England." Born of poor parents in London in 1889, he won scholarships to Christ's Hospital and to Brasenose College, Oxford. His classical education, combined with his proletarian origins, may have caused the indomitably independent literary judgments that have earned him both respect and rancor from his literary contemporaries. At any rate, since joining the staff of the *Westminster Gazette* in 1912 he has always been connected with literary opinions of pronounced independence. He was editor of the *The Athenaeum* from 1919 to 1921, and of *The Adelphi* from 1923 to 1928.

In 1913 began one of the most important relationships in his life, his love affair with Katherine Mansfield, which was punctuated by marriage in 1918. He says that her "greater talent" influenced him as much as the writings of men like Tolstoy and Chekhov. He regards his book on Swift as the culmination of a lifelong search for values. Swift's "passion, pathos, and fierce integrity" appeal to his own spirit, which has always sought "a conception of the good life which would claim my allegiance in thought as well as in act." From 1938 to 1950 he tried to put this belief into practice by turning aside from literary criticism and setting up a cooperative farm. In 1950 he felt ready to return to criticism, "but without subjectivity," since he no longer needed the help and inspiration of the great writers. He feels that out of his own spiritual search he has drawn the capacity to reinterpret the spiritual crisis in Swift's life.

Now living in semi-ascetic seclusion at Theltham, near Diss in Norfolk (he lists his recreation as gardening), he looks back on a life that has also included membership in the Order of the British Empire, intimate friendship with D. H. Lawrence, renown as the definitive biographer of John Keats, and a reputation as an original interpreter of the lives and works of William Blake, Shakespeare, and Jesus.

—THOMAS E. COONEY.

have performed an irregular and probably illegal marriage, in a garden and not a church, without witnesses, and with no record.

In 1921 Mr. Murry wrote "A Critical Credo" in which he defined the function of criticism as being "primarily the function of literature itself, to provide a means of self-expression for the critic." What can happen when this notion of criticism is applied to biographical interpretation may be illustrated by Mr. Murry's quotation from Swift's letter to Sheridan, written when Swift believed Stella was fatally ill: "She loved you well, and a great share of the little merit I have with you is owing to her solicitations." Mr. Murry comments: "The words reveal Swift's eagerness to assume that Stella was dead—to have done with the agony." But Mr. Murry has quoted only part of the sentence which begins: "I fear while you are reading this, you will be shedding tears at her funeral; she loved you well . . ." Thus Mr. Murry translates Swift's fear into eagerness.

It is perhaps Mr. Murry's critical credo that leads him to advance his "final impression" of Swift as "one who has been radically infected by the corruption he universally discovers." Mr. Murry thus continues the Victorian tradition of viewing Swift through Thackeray's horrified eyes as a man "filthy in word, filthy in thought, furious, raging, obscene." Mr. Murry's descriptive epithets include "perverse," "unnatural," "mentally diseased," "perverted passion"; he discovers the most appropriate symbol for Swift "in his own picture of the Yahoos squatting in the trees discharging their excrement on Gulliver beneath." He concludes that "Gulliver's Travels" is a "gratuitous degradation of humanity" and that it "lacks integrity." However much light Swift has cast on the permanent problem of man's self-delusion, it is undeniable that his imagination often lacked sweetness. In the nineteenth century the personalized interpretation of Swift was understandable: it had lost touch with the traditions and techniques of neo-classic satire, of which Swift was the most brilliant and complex master. But during the last generation the board has been cleared by the study of the history of ideas and of literary genres. At the present time, therefore, one feels Mr. Murry's personalized approach is unsophisticated. To read Swift's satires so exclusively as "self-expression" is a mistaken as well as an exhausted enterprise that overlooks the aims and decorum of neo-classic satire as well as the traditional Christian values that underlie Swift's dissection of "the surface and the rind of things."

Irish Patrician

"George Moore: A Reconsideration," by Malcolm Brown (University of Washington Press, 235 pp. \$4.50), is a first attempt to revive the reputation of a variegated Anglo-Irish man of letters of the last century. It is reviewed by Leon Edel, biographer of Henry James.

By Leon Edel

OF THE Irish writers who enriched English letters during the last century, George Moore is probably at this moment in deepest eclipse. Wilde has held his peculiar position—a wit turned by fate into a tragedian—for a good half century; Shaw revitalized the English theatre and his plays continue to live; Yeats remains at the summit, a supreme poet-figure, an artist who grew with age and died powerful. The full effect of James Joyce is only beginning to be measured and it is well-nigh incalculable. He is woven into the deepest textures of our century. Moore alone, so recently of this brilliant company, read and admired and endlessly voluble, is now resting in that limbo in which writers wait for revival, and from which few are revived.

Malcolm Brown seems to think that the Irish novelist's day must come; and to speed it he has written a witty and charming book, concise and to the point, and smoothly readable. "George Moore: A Reconsideration" is filled with temperate and good-humored insight and is quite admirable as portraiture. For that is what it is: neither a full-dress critique nor a full-length biography, it is quite simply a portrait and a very successful one.

The portrait of George Moore, the Irish patrician who chose the way of art rather than of horse-flesh, is an engaging one. It is that of a kind of irascible and unsubtle André Gide of Irish letters, Gide-like only in that Moore, like his French confrere, preferred the mask of Proteus to the spectacle of his own visage. And this is to have no mask at all, for Proteus was a man of many shapes that he could assume at will. Moore started to be a painter, threw his brush away, donned a Latin Quarter hat and cape and tried to write English poetry that would read like Baudelaire. Then he read Zola and promptly wrote a series of naturalistic novels, at least one ("Esther Waters") of which will continue to be read. Then at one leap he read Walter Pater and became a votary of the high estheticism. In the

midst of this literary Ireland shook itself awake and Moore rushed across the Channel to be among the first on the bandwagon. He helped found the Irish Literary Theatre, the progenitor of the Abbey, collaborated with Yeats, and thoroughly antagonized everyone. Finally he settled in Ebury Street in London, where our generation saw him and listened to him amid endless talk which he put into many autobiographies. At the end this symbolist-naturalist-realist-regionalist wrote novels that combined the narrative simplicity of Turgenev with the thematic efflorescence of Wagner and the simple yet artful manner of the Irish shanachies.

Out of his many years of writing certain works achieved a unity and an individuality. Some of his readers have preferred "The Brook Kerith" or "The Lake" or "Heloise and Abelard" to "Esther Waters"; still others relish the autobiographies with their petulant posturing and fascinating arrogance, reliable only in the portrait they project of Moore, and the portrait is involuntary. Moore's life, in sum, was a search for an identity that neither his homeland, nor his gentry background, nor the bohemian quarters of Paris, nor Victorian London could give him. And his migration between these, with his cat, his Aubusson carpet, his impressionist paintings and his antique clock, were those of a deracinated Irish gentleman who could find no real corner of his own. He finally melted his coat of many colors into a pastiche, a rather remarkable one, and this is the George Moore we know, the man who practiced criticism by denunciation and often did not read the books he criticized; and who by dint of hard work achieved a style artfully simple yet often factitious. Yeats with his unfailing psychological awareness had early recognized that Moore was a man without an ego. "He was all self and yet he had so little self," wrote Yeats. Hence the need to simulate others.

I would submit to Malcolm Brown that this is perhaps the real reason for George Moore's eclipse. Brown postulates that Moore has fallen into disremembrance because he made so many enemies during his lifetime. But his enemies are gone. And to a new generation, Joyce and Yeats reign because they had towering identities, while Moore has fallen from sight because he remained, somehow, an author in search of a personality. Malcolm Brown makes us see this with vivid touches and lively scholarship, without perhaps sufficient awareness that Moore's shortcomings and imperfections during his lifetime remain his posthumous liabilities.