

## A NOTE ON NOSTALGIA

ALL one can gather from the present day use of the word 'nostalgia' in criticism is that it confers on the user a kind of aloof superiority. 'Somewhat nostalgic,' says J. B. Trend of an article he reviewed in *The Criterion* last January, and a few pages further on another critic brings the same charge against Middleton Murry. E. Miller, the psycho-pathologist, makes a most sweeping generalisation on the relation between nostalgia and some forms of art: 'In so far as poetry in its lyrical manifestation is the nostalgic cry of the mind expressing its attitude towards nature, experience, and the inner self, it is *par excellence* the voice of the schizothymic temperament. . . This nostalgic background of all lyric art. . . ' [*Types of Mind and Body*, p. 100]. The word invariably conveys the same tone of slightly pitying disparagement, but what it implies beyond this vague attitude of the critic is seldom clear. Generally, of course, it is no more than a conveniently non-committal derogatory label. But even when the theme is developed a little no very precise meaning appears, although the potency of the word becomes impressive. Waldo Frank shows what can be done with it: 'The nostalgia of T. S. Eliot and Berlin (Irving Berlin, the songwriter) is feeble; it is the refrain, dissolved in our world of early nineteenth-century romantics (Musset and Nerval—Schubert and Robert Franz)' [*The Re-discovery of America*, p. 131.] With nostalgia neither defined nor evaluated, utterances like this remain safely beyond the range of discussion.

Simple homesickness appears to be typically an aspect of social life. True, the 'home' one yearns for comprises the whole familiar framework—objects and institutions as well as people—within which one lives and in dealing with which one possesses established habits and sentiments. (It was inevitable that Proust should record the experience: *Place Names* the second section of *Within a Budding Grove* has this for one of its explicit themes). Nevertheless, out of the whole framework, people are missed most.

And it seems probable that the comfort of familiar furniture and routine is only a substitute for, or a suggestion of, the sense of security given by membership of an adequate social group. It may be that a 'herd instinct' has to be assumed to explain the fact that social life gives this satisfaction, but the assumption is questionable. All that seems indisputable is the obvious fact: that we do put high value upon the sharing and sanctioning by others of our interests, attitudes, and sentiments.

But the notion of 'others' and the group in this sense needs to be examined. Being bound to other people by having any interest in common with them constitutes group membership of a sort. An explorer living with a primitive tribe and sharing their interest in food-seeking, means of shelter and what-not, is in some degree a member of the group. Nevertheless he is much more a member of his civilized group at home, for that group shares not only his primitive impulses but some at least of his more highly developed ways of behaving and feeling. To be fully adequate a group must not only offer fellowship in the everyday concern for simple comfort, physical and emotional; it must also be able to appraise the finer achievement of its members. Not that a genius must surround himself with equals before he can feel comfortable; simply that he and his group should recognise that his most advanced work is at least rooted in socially sanctioned evaluations. Loyalty to the group and satisfaction from it must both be incomplete for people whose deepest concerns appear to be unrelated to those of the group. And in everyday life the fundamental need for social backing is obscured by the necessity for constantly ignoring the standards of the group with which one happens to dwell, but of which one is not wholeheartedly a member. It is the frustrated desire for an adequate group that lies behind typically nostalgic writing.

Synge's *Aran Islands* illustrates the point admirably. Synge periodically fled from 'civilization' to the primitive Aran islanders, seeing in their manners something more congenial to his own attitudes. Certainly they jarred on him less than did civilized people, but naturally they could give him no positive fellowship in his complex interests. He would have liked to think that their manner of living was the everyday manifestation of a rather highly developed culture, of what he calls 'the real spirit of the island.'

' Yet it is only in the intonation of a few sentences or some old fragment of melody that I catch the real spirit of the island, for in general the men sit together and talk with endless iteration of the tides and fish, and the price of kelp in Connemara.' He had abandoned one inadequate group for another, and he could find full fellowship in neither. His indictment of the civilized group after his return to the mainland is bitterly nostalgic. ' I have come out of an hotel full of tourists and commercial travellers, to stroll along the edge of Galway Bay, and look out in the direction of the islands. The sort of yearning I feel towards those lonely rocks is indescribably acute. This town that is usually so full of wild human interest, seems in my present mood a tawdry medley of all that is crudest in modern life. The nullity of the rich and the squalor of the poor give me the same pang of wondering disgust; yet the islands are fading already and I can hardly realise that the smell of the seaweed and the drone of the Atlantic are still moving round them.' His relief on taking flight is pathetic: ' It gave me a moment of exquisite satisfaction to find myself moving away from civilization in this crude canvas canoe that has served primitive races since man first went on the sea.' And his slight puzzled disappointment after sojourning with the primitive group points clearly to the social implication of his recurrent nostalgia: ' In some ways these men and women seem strangely far away from me. They have the same emotions that I have, and the animals have; yet I cannot talk to them when there is much to say, more than to the dog that whines beside me in a mountain fog. There is hardly an hour I am with them that I do not feel the shock of some inconceivable idea, and then again the shock of some vague emotion that is familiar to them and to me. On some days I feel this island as a perfect home and resting place; on other days I feel that I am a waif among the people. I can feel more with them than they can with me, and while I wander among them they like me sometimes, and laugh at me sometimes, yet never know what I am doing.'

Thomas Mann confirms the view that nostalgia is one outcome of incomplete membership of any social group when he describes lifelong nostalgia as the lot of Tonio Kröger, ' a *bourgeois* who strayed off into art, a bohemian who feels nostalgic yearnings for respectability, an artist with a bad conscience.'

It is obviously impossible to state in general terms the causes underlying a writer's failure to satisfy his social needs. Each case would need separate analysis. Certainly there is no universal circumstance that renders nostalgia inevitable. The contemporary flank-rubbing herd that highly-developed people can form at any one period is naturally small, but it has the advantage of a tradition extraordinarily rich and accessible compared with that of the main community.<sup>1</sup> And though the flank-rubbing herd is a necessity, yet the recorded feelings and attitudes of people no longer living are remarkably effective in sanctioning and confirming one's own ways of living. However, it conceals a complication to speak as if the group simply sanctioned, or failed to sanction, the individual's way of living. It demands of him some degree of submissiveness. Sanction can have no meaning without the admission that social disapproval would have been equally significant. The individual need not submit to any person or accept any formulated canon, but he must acknowledge that other people's experience is relevant to his own. From that there follows inevitably the progressive modification of his personality as he deepens his understanding of contemporary attitudes, and still more of tradition. That part of him that he considers unique grows smaller and smaller (and at the same time more and more significant) the more fully he comes to see his own experience in the light of other people's.

You tell me I am wrong.

Who are you, who is anybody to tell me I am wrong?

I am not wrong.

That was a typical attitude of D. H. Lawrence, so Richard Aldington suggests. It is an attitude that everyone who matters in the least must hold in reserve, for it represents the only way in which the conservatism of the group can be overcome, the only way in which changes can be made in contemporary life, and tradition extended. But with Lawrence it was a more or less permanent attitude. He seems to have wanted sanction, and nothing but sanction, for the whole of his personality, and so, inevitably, he cut himself off from the possibility of group life.

---

<sup>1</sup>The relation between the cultural tradition and different sections of the contemporary group deserves to be examined rather fully.

The yearning for a group remained. It showed itself in him, as it did in a less significant way in Synge, as a desperate experimenting with primitive peoples. Naturally none of the experiments gave him what he wanted. An air of fantasia marks those parts of *The Plumed Serpent* that describes the general, social re-creation of the religion; an air that is absent from the treatment of the individual characters' experiences. His need of a group is always present; he was never self-sufficient. He seems to have been one of those men who cannot add to a tradition without first wrecking it—who cannot co-operate. It is typical of such men to believe that the mass of humanity or the mass of a people would come to support their particular valuations if only it could be freed from some artificial overlay. Gordon Craig's writings present the same picture of rebellion with nostalgia, and it is this state, perhaps, that underlies his belief in the possibility of a 'people's theatre' (if he still believes in it).

These are crude simplifications, however, and the evaluation of nostalgia in writing demands the most delicate perception of a writer's attitude to his experience. It can be said in general that complete absence of nostalgia in a modern writer is suspect, suggesting complacent fellowship with the main commercial group, or seclusion with an academic group, or life among the cliques, or too little questioning and testing of the tradition. But permanent, unresolved nostalgia is a failure too. In most cases, probably, it can be traced to a failure of discrimination in resisting social coercion. It is presumably impossible to achieve the knife-edge balancing between humility and servility, the insight to judge one's judges, that would be idéal in one's relation to a social group; and the temptation to reject everything, cliques, conventions, and tradition, baby and bath, is unfortunately strongest for the most vigorous personalities.

Another kind of writing, altogether distinct from that considered already, might seem to invite the description 'nostalgic,' for one thing because it frequently expresses the writer's longing for his home. The following poem which I quote from memory is an instance (it is attributed to Rudolph Valentino):

All of them gift-books,  
But plainly I see  
Not one of them holds

The gift for me.  
 I want a book  
 That will lazily roam  
 Down the dear pathway  
 To folks back home.

Lawrence's poem *Piano* is another example at a different level. This kind of writing reveals no craving for the social sanctioning of the writer's adult and complex ways of living. It seems more closely related to the impulse to abandon these for a time and regress to a simpler level of life, at which one's needs were slight and their complete satisfaction comparatively easy. Every advance to more complex integrations of behaviour involves, of course, effort, and the tendency is always present to throw up the sponge and take things easily—to regress to the earlier and simpler organisations of impulses. J. T. MacCurdy points out that the welcoming of death as a rest and a sleep is one expression of the tendency: the underlying impulse is not to go forward to meet death, but to go back to a state of freedom from effort, a state which has been approximated to only in pre-natal life. 'If reality is difficult to endure, and if acute consciousness is developmentally connected with the recognition of external reality, and if contact with the environment is essentially a function of consciousness. . . then a most natural regression would appear with a dissolution of consciousness associated with some expression of return to the earlier type of existence. One would expect the latter to be formulated as ideas of death and, in fact, this is a universal phenomenon. Suicide is common, death is frequently portrayed as a release from life. . .' [*Problems in Dynamic Psychology* p. 158—159]. So Chaucer makes his old man, weary of living, say:

'And on the ground, which is my modres gate,  
 I knokke with my staf, both erly and late,  
 And seye, "leve moder, leet me in!  
 Lo, how I vanish, flesh, and blood, and skin!  
 Allas! when shul my bones been at reste? . . ."'

A clear example of verse expressing regressive impulses is provided by Edward Shanks in *The Grey Land*:

There was a man who loved a wood so well,  
 Each separate tree, each flower, each climbing weed,

That at the last he thither went to dwell  
 And mix himself with all those quiet things.  
 Then gradually left him thought and deed  
 And dead were all his soul's imaginings.  
     So day by day,  
 All his own being gently flowed away  
     And left him mixed indeed  
     With flower and climbing weed,  
 With them in summer green, in autumn grey.  
 So the grey country calls me till I go  
 And make surrender of myself again;  
 The misty hill, the leaden stream below  
 Are waiting to receive me when I will.  
 And if my stubborn heart and hands complain  
 A slow wind moves upon the misty hill  
 And whispers to me here of peace and rest,  
 Of union with stone and grass and tree,  
 Where being sleeps and is not curst or blest,  
 Where hands can never feel and eyes not see,  
     Where life and death alike are grey,  
 In this grey land that sucks my life away.

The underlying regressive tendency in this verse comes out clearly in contrast with the following by T. S. Eliot :

Because I cannot drink  
 There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is  
     nothing again

Because I cannot hope to turn again  
 Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something  
     Upon which to rejoice.

Rupert Brooke's poem *Retrospect* offers an example of regressive verse in which the 'mother' references are very prominent :

O mother quiet, breasts of peace,  
 Where love itself would faint and cease!  
 O infinite deep I never knew,  
 I would come back, come back to you,

Find you as a pool unstirred,  
Kneel down by you, and never a word,  
Lay my head, and nothing said,  
In your hands, ungarlanded;  
And a long watch you would keep;  
And I should sleep, and I should sleep!

The fact of experiencing the tendency towards regression means nothing. It is the final attitude towards the experience that has to be evaluated, and in literature this attitude may be suggested only very subtly by means of the total context. In *The Grey Land* and in *Piano* the writer's attitude is clear. Shanks obviously finds a tranquil pleasure in the thought of throwing up the sponge. In Lawrence's poem the impulse seems to have been equally strong and is certainly expressed more forcefully, but the attitude is different. Lawrence is adult, stating the overwhelming strength of the impulse but reporting resistance to it and implying that resistance is better than yielding:

In spite of myself the insidious mastery of song  
Betrays me back. . . .

The glamour  
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast  
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for  
the past.

There are of course several connecting links between regression and nostalgia. One is the likelihood that regressive tendencies will be especially strong in people who have found no adequate social group and tend to be nostalgic. Another is the fact that the longing for some remoter period than the present may unite both tendencies; regressive because the ideal period seems to have been free from difficulties that have to be met in the present, and nostalgic because the difficulties of the present are seldom unrelated to the difficulty of living with an uncongenial group.

The critical usefulness of an evaluation of nostalgia must rest on the possibility of detecting the feeling in a writer, and, here, unfortunately, definition and analysis are not much help. Everything depends on the reader's sensitiveness. One can say, however,

that the word ought not to be used unless the quality of feeling to be described is recognisably similar to the common experience of homesickness: the feeling of distress for no localised, isolated cause, together with a feeling that one's environment is strange, and vaguely wrong and unacceptable. There is hardly a trace of this feeling—and it seems curious at first that there should not be—in Thomas Hardy's poems. Grief, regret, disappointment, remorse, are all to be found there, in their most poignant forms, but they have been felt only in situations in which they are generally recognised to be appropriate: the grief is for someone dead, the regret for neglected opportunities of living. There is no suggestion that Hardy was aware of isolation. The suspicion is unavoidable that his freedom from nostalgia implies too great a readiness to conform without question to the accepted canons of art and behaviour, and in line with this suspicion are the absence of significant technical innovations in his writing, and the fact (reported by Robert Graves) that he regarded *Marmion* as an indisputable standard in poetry. The account of his life by Mrs. Hardy reinforces the impression that he was never aware of isolation. One may quote in particular a letter he wrote to Alfred Noyes, severe, and full of surprise that such a man as Alfred Noyes should misinterpret his philosophy. 'It seems strange that I should have to remind a man of letters of what, I should have supposed, he would have known as well as I—of the very elementary rule of criticism that a writer's works should be judged as a whole, and not from picked passages that contradict them as a whole—.' Further in the letter he says, 'But it has always been my misfortune to presuppose a too intelligent reading public . . . "What a fool one must have been to write for such a public!" is the inevitable reflection at the end of one's life' [*The Later Years of Thomas Hardy*, pp. 216-217]. This naive exasperation at the end of his life strongly suggests that he somehow failed to see the impossibility of any genuine community between himself and the general public. His avoidance of public attention does not contradict this conclusion: he was still accepting a recognised niche in the public mind—that reserved for 'the secluded author'—just as Sir Basil Zaharoff and Mr. Montague Norman fit perfectly into the classificatory system of the public they shun.

No pervasive tendency to nostalgia is to be found in T. S. Eliot's poems, but its absence here obviously demands a different explanation. There can be no doubt of Mr. Eliot's awareness of the limitations of the group he lives amongst: *Triumphal March*, and *The Journey of the Magi* express clearly an attitude that is evident enough in most of his work.

We returned to our places, these kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.

But the feeling of nostalgia is not pervasive, because the predicament it results from has been faced consciously and understood:

I have heard the key  
Turn in the door once and turn once only  
We think of the key, each in his prison  
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison  
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours  
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus

His realisation of the inadequacy and misfortune of the 'independent' man seems to underlie Mr. Eliot's insistence on the importance of a tradition and of the Church.

In Edward Thomas's poetry the feeling of nostalgia is pervasive.

Never a word was spoken, not a thought  
Was thought, of what the look meant with the word  
'Home' as we walked and watched the sunset blurred.  
And then to me the word, only the word,  
'Homesick,' as it were playfully occurred:  
No more.

If I should ever more admit  
Than the mere word I could not endure it  
For a day longer: this captivity  
Must somehow come to an end, else I should be  
Another man, as often now I seem,  
Or this life be only an evil dream.

Occasionally, its social origin is suggested, as in a poem where he speaks of being 'born into this solitude,' and describes himself listening to the rain,

. . . thus in sympathy  
 Helpless among the living and the dead,  
 Like a cold water among broken reeds

In most of the poems there is no recognition of any underlying social cause for his feeling. Yet the quality of the melancholy so often suggests nostalgia that it is hard not to suppose that the unadmitted craving for an adequate social group lay behind his most characteristic moods. Even when he describes his unhappiness as the inevitable outcome of his temperament there are social overtones still to be heard:

Over all sorts of weather, men, and times,  
 Aspens must shake their leaves and men may hear  
 But need not listen, more than to my rhymes.

Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves  
 We cannot other than an aspen be  
 That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,  
 Or so men think who like a different tree.

It is symptomatic too that his happier and more satisfying moments are often associated with an escape from other people, as though normally he never felt free from the pressure of a social group with which he could make no satisfying contact.

Once the name I gave to hours  
 Like this was melancholy, when  
 It was not happiness and powers  
 Coming like exiles home again,  
 And weaknesses quitting their bowers,  
 Smiled and enjoyed, far off from men,  
 Moments of everlastingness.

The same reature is evident in the poem, springing from a different mood that begins:

Early one morning in May I set out,  
 And nobody knew I was about.  
     I'm bound away for ever,  
     Away somewhere, away for ever.

It would be a mistake to complain because Edward Thomas refused to account for his moods and label them. But it is a defect that, through a failure to probe his unhappiness, he implied that its causes were remoter, less tangible and more inevitable than in fact they were. He seems to do this, for instance, in a characteristic poem called *Home*. The poem almost certainly springs from nostalgic feelings, but Edward Thomas gives them a much larger significance, larger than they deserve.

Not the end: but there's nothing more.  
 Sweet Summer and Winter rude  
 I have loved, and friendship and love,  
 The crowd and solitude:

But I know them: I weary not;  
 But all that they mean I know.  
 I would go back again home  
 Now. Yet how should I go?

One may even detect, what Thomas rarely betrays, the nostalgic's lack of genuine humility: 'all that they mean I know.' But he goes on to confess, not to nostalgia, but to the much more overwhelming doubt whether any life, once known, could satisfy him. It is well to remember that these, after all, are criticisms of what might have been only one phase of Edward Thomas's poetry. *The Other* (perhaps his most interesting poem) shows signs of a much more precise probing of experience that he usually attempted, and it is possible that he would have developed this kind of work. But of his existing body of poetry one may say that, though he does not avow it, there are signs everywhere of the predicament encountered by those who are isolated without being self-sufficient.

D. W. HARDING.

## ‘THE LITERARY MIND’

MR. MAX EASTMAN, in the book<sup>1</sup> that bears the title at the head of this essay, presents an interesting case. It is of himself that I am thinking. For, while the case he propounds about ‘the literary mind’ is too naïve and muddled in its complacent philistinism to be seriously discussed, he does indeed witness most impressively to the decay of literary culture. His book may be recommended as a representative document. He is ‘intellectual and a poet,’ he tells us. Yet he can point to the almost complete disappearance of serious critical journals in the last few decades as evidence that we have improved. They have disappeared, he thinks, because Science has put out of date the literary culture they represented. We know nowadays where to go for ‘verified statements,’ and those who contend that literature matters vitally to civilization ‘are fighting for the right of literary men to talk loosely and yet be taken seriously in a scientific age.’

Now ‘literary men’—moralizing dons, Humanists and others—have indeed been guilty of a great deal of ‘loose talk.’ But the critic who proposes to discuss a ‘classical movement’ led by ‘Allen Tate, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Ivor Winters, Edith Sitwell, Robert Graves, Laura Riding’ convicts himself of a looseness that dismisses him with the loosest. Anyone who offers such a list must be pronounced not to know what he is talking about. Mr. Eastman simply cannot see the difference in intellectual status between Mr. Eliot and Miss Sitwell, except that he finds Miss Sitwell more discussible. In poetry he positively prefers her. *Ash-Wednesday* he refers to as an ‘oily puddle of emotional noises,’ but ‘Edith Sitwell is, in my opinion, the most gifted of the modernist poets.’ The late Arnold Bennett, it will be remembered, had a like preference. The reason is simple: it is that Miss Sitwell is simple, and offers her admirers, with ‘modernist’ garnishings, what they expect to find in poetry—sentimental reveries, reminiscences of childhood, and so on. For

---

<sup>1</sup>*The Literary Mind*. Max Eastman [Scribners. 10/6d.]