

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH CRITICISM ?

A REPRESENTATIVE set<sup>1</sup> of books of contemporary criticism is at any rate an occasion for the inquiry proposed above.

That literary criticism is not in a healthy state we all—readers of *Scrutiny*, or those, at least, in sympathy with the undertaking—assume; the undertaking explicitly affirms it. But perhaps we assume a consensus too easily: it is of the essence of the plight that the plight can be questioned. As of taste, so of criticism; we must expect to be assured with Olympian dispassionateness that it always has been in a bad state and always will be. Such dispassionateness is probably invincible. Yet that the argument should be found impressive represents one of the most desperate of the conditions that we have to deal with, and the challenge to cogency of statement should sometimes be taken up.

No one is going to assert that criticism was ever in a satisfactory state. Just what, then, is peculiarly, and so desperately, wrong to-day? Why all this fuss?

One may start, paradoxically, by asserting that this age will be remarkable in literary history for its achievement in criticism. The histories of literary criticism contain a great many names, but how many critics are there who have made any difference to one—improved one's apparatus, one's equipment, one's efficiency as a reader? At least two of them are of our time: Mr. Eliot and Mr. Richards; it is a very large proportion indeed of the total. Mr. Richards has immensely improved the instruments of analysis, and has consolidated and made generally accessible the contribution of Coleridge. Mr. Eliot has not only refined the conception and

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<sup>1</sup>*Poetry and the Criticism of Life*, H. W. Garrod. *Variety of Ways*, Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford, 5/-). *Criticism*, Desmond MacCarthy (Putnam, 7/6d.).

the methods of criticism; he has put into currency decisive re-organizing and re-orientating ideas and valuations. The stimulus of these two very dissimilar forces has already made itself felt, and there is no reason to suppose that Mr. Empson's book will prove to be the only important critical work produced by their juniors.

But all this does not affect the conviction expressed in the second sentence of this essay. That this is so one might attempt to enforce by adducing Professor Garrod's *Poetry and the Criticism of Life*. Professor Garrod says of Coleridge: 'The appeal of his poetry is strong with me; and the appeal of the man. But just those qualities which make a critic he seems to me to lack.' And that disposes of Coleridge. It will be readily and rightly guessed that just those qualities which make a critic are what the rest of the book shows Professor Garrod to lack: yet it was respectfully reviewed by respected authority. But evidence of this kind is not to be seriously urged. There is long-established precedent for Professor Garrod and his reception, and his book does not really raise the important issues.

Nor does Mr. Bonamy Dobrée's *Variety of Ways*. One might set it over against Professor Garrod's book as showing that academic criticism is not necessarily unprofitable. Mr. Dobrée is not merely elegant, and such scholarly essays as his on Congreve perform a function, though his treatment of rhythm and style—indeed of all he handles—would have been more profitable if his scholarship and taste had been served by a better analytic equipment. But this is not the debate intended in the question, 'What's wrong with criticism?'; we cannot start from this text.

It is the third book, Mr. Desmond MacCarthy's, that really raises the issues. For Mr. MacCarthy is not a professor of poetry or a scholar or a specialist, but a professional critic, a journalist; in him criticism undertakes its essential function of keeping an educated body of taste and opinion alive to the age, of testing, nourishing and refining the currency of contemporary culture. And that there is still in some sense somewhere something like an educated body of taste and opinion the intelligence and limitations of Mr. MacCarthy's *Criticism* together show. For nowhere does it give evidence of any subtlety of first-hand judgment. In all the testing cases—in dealing with Donne and David

Garnett, for instance—he is conventional and superficial. D. H. Lawrence he compares with Carlyle and T. S. Eliot with Browning, leaving the stress on the likeness; no one intelligently interested in either could have done that. Mr. MacCarthy, then, is not an original critic; he is the journalist-middleman of cultivated talk.

On this estimate he does at any rate testify to the existence of a certain cultivated *milieu* where there is an active interest in literature. But his significance for this inquiry lies in his distinction—for he is distinguished, if not quite in the way his reputation intends. In the serious pursuit of his function he enjoys something like a lonely eminence. Who else is there? In a healthy state we should have at least twenty journalist-critics of his quality, whereas if we look round we can see only the *confrérie* of the weeklies and the Sunday papers. The distinction so indicated, moreover, is one that the bulk of his readers cannot be counted on to appreciate to the full. Who, if not they, form the *élite* that follows the reviewing in 'our more elegant weeklies' (for the reviewing here, whatever may be the case with the accompaniment to the Sunday advertising, does appear to be taken seriously by such educated class as we have)?

Here, then, we have come to what is radically wrong with criticism. The public that makes any show of interest in literature is only a small minority, and though there may be behind Mr. MacCarthy a circle actively and intelligently interested, it is a tiny minority of a minority, which, for all the effect it has as representing generally operative standards, might as well not exist. And where there is no nucleus of an educated public representing such standards the function of criticism has fallen into abeyance, and no amount of improvement in the apparatus and technique will restore it. It becomes impossible even to get the plight recognized. My argument, for instance, (I lapse appropriately into the first person), will, except to those who find it obvious, seem for the most part an arbitrary tissue of arrogant dogmatisms.

It is more than the function of criticism that has fallen into abeyance. To those who take a serious interest in literature it must often seem as if their interest were curiously irrelevant to the modern world; curiously, because a serious interest in literature starts from the present and assumes that literature matters, in the first place at any rate, as the consciousness of the age. If a

literary tradition does not keep itself alive here, in the present, not merely in new creation, but as a pervasive influence upon feeling, thought and standards of living (it is time we challenged the economist's use of this phrase), then it must be pronounced to be dying or dead. Indeed, it seems hardly likely that, when this kind of influence becomes negligible, creation will long persist. In any case, a consciousness maintained by an insulated minority and without effect upon the powers that rule the world has lost its function. And this describes well enough the existing state of affairs. To put it in more particular terms, no one interested in poetry can suppose that if all the serious poets now writing died within the year the newspapers would register any noticeable shock. The world is not interested; and this lack of interest must seem to those concerned about culture more frightening than hostility.

The world, it will be retorted, has something else to be interested in; those who see the desperate need for action, political and other, can have no concern to spare for the state of poetry and literary criticism. The need for political action few will be inclined to deny. But it seems pertinent to inquire the worth of political action or theory that is not directed towards realizing some idea of satisfactory living. I do not assert that traditional culture and literary tradition are identical, but their relation is such that those who are aware of it will not expect one to survive without the other; and it would seem romantic to expect that an adequate idea will issue out of amnesia—out of a divorce from the relevant experience of the race.

For some, of course, the problem is simple; inherited art and culture are bourgeois and must be replaced. Upon this philosophy I can hardly hope to make an impression, but I can hope, for most who are likely to read me, to have made clear the nature of my concern about the death of the literary tradition and the state of criticism—that is not a concern for the prestige of a minority as such.

The phrase 'minority culture' appears to have gained currency. What does not appear to be equally current is the realization that a genuine concern for 'minority culture' cannot be satisfaction with it. The more one cares about the values it preserves, the more clearly one realizes the function it represents,

the less likely is one to be drawn towards the pleasures of Pharisaism.

There are, of course, the pleasures of pessimism, and they have no doubt been suspected of complicity in my assertion about the newspapers and the hypothetical death of all our poets. But the assertion was critically sober, and the stress judicial. For, as a matter of fact, the decay of the literary tradition is less conclusively manifested in the grosser absurdities of, say, the *Observer* (which after all are notorious) than in the more respectable absurdities of our most respected anthologies, with their scores of modern poets—Professor Lascelles Abercrombie recently presented a drove of forty. These anthologies are not, among Mr. MacCarthy's public (let us say), a byword for fatuity; they exhibit fairly the state of contemporary taste. The standards that, maintained in a living tradition, should have made them impossible have vanished, for the tradition has vanished, and the conventional respect for poetry of the cultivated remains, in general, purely conventional, uninformed by tradition—'traditional,' that is, in the bad sense.

Poetry, then, though it may still be examined on at school, has ceased to matter; it is taken, if at all, on authority. Where, on the other hand, the world takes interest, authority—the authority vested in tradition—has disappeared, as was foreseen by the late Sir Edmund Gosse forty years ago:

'One danger which I have long foreseen from the spread of democratic sentiment is that of the traditions of literary taste, the canons of literature, being reversed with success by a popular vote. Up to the present time, in all parts of the world, the masses of uneducated or semi-educated persons, who form the vast majority of the race, have been content to acknowledge their traditional supremacy. Of late there have seemed to me to be certain signs, especially in America, of a revolt of the mob against our literary masters. . . . If literature is to be judged by a plebiscite and if the plebs recognizes its powers, it will certainly by degrees cease to support reputations which give it no pleasure and which it cannot comprehend. The revolution against taste, once begun, will land us in irreparable chaos.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*What is a Great Poet?* (1889), in *Questions at Issue*.

Skimming through *The Life and Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse* one cannot help reflecting that he himself was a portent. He had, it appears, no qualification for authority except a belief in his right to it. This was sublime: 'You are a poet of a high order,' we find him writing to Mr. J. C. Squire, 'and a mind in curiously close sympathy with me. I feel myself singularly in tune with you. I understand exactly what you say. It is so rare. . . . You will make a great name!' (And there are elsewhere in the book appreciations of Mr. Squire that deserve to become anthology-pieces). His inability to see what is in front of him is sometimes almost incredible: he cultivates André Gide and finds Mr. E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*, that most maidenly, most transparently innocent, of books, 'sensational, dirty, and affected.' His critical incapacity, sometimes comic, was always complete. And yet his success was complete too; he imposed himself and became an institution, the embodiment of critical authority. It looks as if the absence of standards that I have been deploring is no new thing. Nevertheless there is an important difference between the age of Edmund Gosse and the age of Arnold Bennett. The standards in Gosse's time may not have been generally operative among the 'cultivated,' but respect for them was. Nothing else can explain his ascendancy: he stood for the taste and learning that, being above the general level, made it possible for the common man to hope to improve himself. But a tradition that allows itself to be embodied in a Gosse is obviously in danger.

Civilization advanced. The triumph of 'democratic sentiment' that Gosse foresaw was brought about by forces that he does not appear to have noticed. Mass-production, standardization, levelling-down—these three terms convey succinctly, what has happened. Machine-technique has produced change in the ways of life at such a rate that there has been something like a breach of continuity; sanctions have decayed; and, in any case, the standards of mass-production (for mass-production conditions now govern the supply of literature) are not those of tradition. Instead of conventional respect for traditional standards we have the term 'high-brow'; indeed, such remains of critical standards as a desperate and scattered minority may now fight for can hardly be called traditional, for the tradition has dissolved: the centre—

Arnold's 'centre of intelligent and urbane spirit,' which, in spite of his complaints, we can see by comparison to have existed in his day—has vanished. Instead we have the Book Society, Ltd., recommending 'worth-while' books with the psychological resources of modern publicity, one of the most valuable of which is the term 'high-brow.'

It is, then, vain to hope that standards will somehow re-establish themselves in the higgling of the market; the machinery of civilization works unceasingly to obliterate the very memory of them. What then can be done? In despair one toys with desperate recourses: would it be of any use, before it is too late and oblivion sets in, to try to focus what remains of tradition in a 'central authority representing higher culture and sound judgment'—to try whether an organ can be found, capable of the function that Arnold assigned to academies? 'Such an effort,' Arnold reminds us, 'to set up a recognised authority, imposing on us a high standard in matters of intellect and taste, has many enemies in human nature.' These enemies are now, to a degree that Arnold can hardly have foreseen, invested with power and conscious of virtue. Yet there are friends too—the need for such a standard is also in human nature—and perhaps the extremity of the case will rally them to the effort.

And then one remembers Sir Edmund Gosse: there we have the kind of mind that gets into academies. There is also the academic mind of the more respectable order represented by Professor Lascelles Abercrombie. Professor Abercrombie, writing on Literary Criticism in a recent *Outline of Modern Knowledge* (a production symptomatic of the times), devoted a third of his space to Aristotle and a proportionate amount to Longinus, and in his bibliography mentioned at least one bad and several insignificant books, but neither Mr. Richards nor Mr. Eliot. Still, the article is scholarly, and there might be something to be said for this kind of academic mind if only it could be brought into touch with what is alive.

Someone may by now have remembered that there is a Royal Society of Literature in being. Founded by George IV, it is already venerable: might not something be done to establish a recognized 'centre of intelligent and urbane spirit' here? The Society is not notorious; no one, except its members, seems to

know much about it. Readers of the *Times Literary Supplement*, however, will remember to have seen at intervals long and respectful reviews of certain volumes called *Essays by Divers Hands*. The hands are those of Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature.

If one hunts down the books in a library one has to brace oneself before dipping, they look so dull. Yet they do contain light reading. For instance, one may have the luck to take down the volume (1923) in which Mr. Alfred Noyes discourses on *Some Characteristics of Contemporary Literature*: 'In the current number of the *Quarterly Review* there is a review—an exceedingly able review—of a recently published novel, which, I say without hesitation, and without the slightest fear that anyone here who has seen it will disagree with me, is the foulest that ever found its way into print.' After the moralist the literary critic: 'The technical quality of the writing is beneath contempt.' Mr. Joyce is not even original; in realistic audacity he was forestalled by Tennyson in *Locksley Hall*. (Of *In Memoriam*, by the way, we are told: 'It is probably the greatest elegy in any language, not because this or that authority says so, but demonstrably.') We are not, then, surprised to find that Mr. Noyes stands for tradition, and does not mince his words: 'All over the English-speaking world this hunt'—represented, we gather, by Mr. Joyce and Mr. Eliot—'for an easier way in technique has been accompanied by a lowering of the standards in every direction. This quality of the thought and the emotion has been incredibly cheapened, and the absence of any fixed and central principles has led to an appalling lack of discrimination. Literary judgments in many cases have become purely arbitrary.' And Mr. Noyes indicates his fellow-Paladins: '... The desire to break the continuity of our tradition has been fought by Mr. Edmund Gosse with the weapon of an irony as delicate as that of Anatole France. Critics of a later generation like Mr. Clutton Brock, Mr. J. C. Squire, Mr. Robert Lynd have also steadily sought to maintain a just balance between the old and the new.'

Mr. Squire and Mr. Lynd, a defender of tradition in any serious sense would have to point out, have been among the most subtle and successful democratizers of standards. And it is comment enough on the academic conception of tradition—which is, of course,



what Mr. Noyes stands for—to point to the company it keeps. In the Royal Society of Literature there is, for instance, Dean Inge, in whom, no doubt, in spite of the differing communions, Mr. Noyes finds a kindred spirit. Dean Inge, too, stands to the defence of technique against literary Bolshevism. He prescribes (1922) classical metres for English poetry: ‘We want laws, or we shall lose all beauty of form.’ On the other hand we remember, hardly with surprise, that Dean Inge has contributed his share to the advance of civilization—not without due recognition, we may hope: ‘I cannot be too grateful for the generosity of the *Evening Standard*, . . .’ as he says in *More Lay Thoughts of a Dean*. He has asserted authority in multifarious provinces, and maintained standards, particularly in the matter of Christian gentility: ‘He was no gentleman,’ he says of Donne, ‘and a very equivocal Christian. I have a rooted distrust of men of letters who, like Donne, Huysmans, and the African novelist, Apuleius, wallow in garbage for many years, and then suddenly “get religion.”’

To-day journalism solicits us everywhere, and the academic conception of tradition, clearly, does not save its champions from wallowing. There are, of course, in the Royal Society of Literature more respectable representatives of the academic mind than Dean Inge, and the aristocratic tradition is also represented. So, since we are also told that it is the policy of the Society ‘to focus its prestige’ by ‘adding to itself under a rigorous system of election a majority of the most distinguished writers of the time,’ we can still be interested. We look anxiously to see who these writers are. Mr. Laurence Binyon is one, we must suppose. Mr. de la Mare is also of the Society. However, he cancels out against Mr. John Drinkwater, who is also there: any ‘recognised authority’ hoping to impose on us ‘a high standard in matters of intellect and taste’ must combat the confusion that lumps Mr. de la Mare and Mr. Drinkwater together as ‘Georgian poets.’ Mr. G. K. Chesterton is also a member, which, perhaps, may pass without comment one way or the other. But when we come to Mr. Hugh Walpole and Miss Clemence Dane we know that the worst is true and the hope was foolish. For Mr. Walpole and Miss Dane are two-fifths of the Book Society Ltd. (or, to be strict, of the Selection Committee) and Miss Dane wrote a book on ‘the traditive novel’ called *Tradition and Hugh Walpole*.

There are other Fellows. There is Miss V. Sackville West, for instance, who, addressing the Society on *Some Tendencies of Modern English Poetry* (1927) contends that 'free verse' is a 'more civilized form' than the other kinds. But this can hardly tend to make Mr. Eliot feel more at home in the Society (for we find him to our astonishment a Fellow). Nor can his presence in such company tend to reverse our conclusion as to the influence of the Society on standards.

The Royal Society of Literature, we must conclude, has no function, unless the incidental one of hall-marking the kind of literature standardized by the Book Society, Ltd.

\* The English Association, which in our search for a likely organ we turn to next, can, on the other hand make out a very strong case for its existence. Its province is education, and its function, in brief, to organize throughout the country such interest in English literature as will admit of organization. But, in the absence of any serious current standards or any 'central authority representing higher culture and sound judgment,' what can it do, we ask, to supply the lack, or to resist the triumphant enemy? And we note with misgiving in the Bulletins of the Association the prominence of certain familiar names, the interlocking with the Royal Society of Literature. But we are not in a hurry to generalize, or to cast up the account, though we get many disquieting glimpses both of the educational work in the country at large and of proceedings at the top of the hierarchy. What Mr. Alfred Noyes is reported as saying to various branches might be adapted and applied to lectures and addresses sponsored by the Association: 'It was perfectly obvious, he said, that many people who wrote about poetry didn't know what they were writing about.' There are lectures on Mr. Walpole's and Mr. Priestley's novels, and even on Mr. Priestley's schooldays. And the healthy-minded dislike of intelligence voiced by Colonel John Buchan does come to have the effect of a corporate spirit: 'Again,' he says, championing the Victorians in an address called *The Novel and the Fairy Tale* (July, 1931), 'they were not clever people, like those who decry them, and in this they were akin to the ordinary man, who is nearly as suspicious of mere cleverness as Mr. Baldwin.' Still, some compromise, perhaps, there must be, and if culture is to enjoy the support of Good-Fellowship it must pay the price; the Good-Fellow ticket is inevitably the anti-highbrow.

But after a glance through the current Bulletin (December, 1931) one's suspicion that the price may leave nothing worth keeping becomes something more than a suspicion. For Professor Oliver Elton, elected President for 1932, speaking at the Annual Dinner of the Association, with the Archbishop of Canterbury in the chair, is reported as having concluded: 'At any rate, whether we are saints or whether we are not saints, we shall all be the better for doing two things, reading the novels of Mr. Hugh Walpole and being members and supporters of the English Association.' Dr. Elton was not speaking without precedent: the *entente* between the English Association and the Book Society had already been well advertised. At the Annual Dinner a year before, Mr. Hugh Walpole, Chairman of Committee (succeeding Mr. J. C. Squire), had said with reference to Mr. J. B. Priestley (once of the Book Society) 'This is the point that I wish to make; that he has, particularly by a recent book of his which we all know, given a new dignity to the position of the "best seller." It is, I believe, a best seller, and it deserves to be. To call it a classic would be, of course, premature and perhaps exaggerated, but I think to say that it is a work of very high literary excellence and that it will live is not going too far.' Mr. Priestley, unfortunately, wasn't present to make the graceful reply, but the President of Magdalen, another fifth of the Selection Committee of the Book Society, Ltd., was, so that Mr. Walpole's 'eminence in letters and enthusiasm for literature' did not go unsignalized.

Is it necessary to inquire further? Looking over the reports of educational work in the country generally we can no longer doubt that it is largely a matter of propagating, and endorsing with the authority and prestige of the Association, the standards of the Book Society. If anyone still hesitates to concur, there is the field of poetry to consider, where, unhappily, we are left no excuse for suspending judgment. For the English Association is responsible for the anthology, very widely used in schools, called *Poems of To-day*, the two volumes of which (as I have heard indignant teachers who have to use it lament) contain between them hardly half-a-dozen good poems. The importance of *Poems of To-day* to the finances of the Association is referred to at most Annual General Meetings. At the Annual Dinner, 1926, Mr. Baldwin, as President-elect, said: 'We are solvent, we are con-

siderably on the right side; but that is because we have been living on the earnings of *Poems of To-day*. We hope to follow it up with equally profitable publications.'—A concise statement of the position: there can be no pleasure in dwelling on the irony.

The worst suspicions aroused by the Royal Society of Literature, then, have been confirmed. There is nothing for it but to conclude that, in the absence of current standards maintained by the authority of tradition, official machinery can only gear in with the mechanism of standardization and levelling-down—can, at the best, only endorse Book Society values. The L.N.E.R. advertizes that it 'brings you to Priestley's England.' The English Association is helping to bring us all to the Book Society's England.

It is then, without extravagant hopes that we turn to the British Broadcasting Corporation, the new organ of culture of which so much is expected. It has been taking its function with admirable seriousness. Last winter's set of talks entitled *This Changing World* was a laudable attempt at educating the public to cope with the modern environment. And good educational work the B.B.C. has, in some sense, undoubtedly done. But how little it can be expected to reverse the process we have been contemplating, to educate in the sense of promulgating standards that would make the Walpole-Priestley régime appear what it is, Mr. Harold Nicolson's notorious talks on *The New Spirit in Literature* should have been sufficient to establish.

Mr. Nicolson's talks were notorious because of the disapproving comment they provoked, and its sequel. They were not notorious for their extravagant absurdity, their vulgarity and their sciolism; the objectors did not point out that Mr. Nicolson had obviously not the first qualification for the undertaking upon which he had embarked with such assurance. However, it might be urged that the mere undertaking was something; it was at least a challenge to Book Society values. That it was so Mr. Nicolson took pains to deny, and we have here the most significant aspect of the whole affair.

'I have,' he assured his listeners, 'a great respect for Mr. Hugh Walpole, who in more than one way has rendered valuable service to literature.'—(Mr. Nicolson was perhaps thinking of the Book Society and the English Association.)—'I admire his character and I have often admired his books.' The assurance was

as explicit as possible. 'I have no doubt whatsoever regarding the literary integrity of Mr. Walpole and Mr. Priestley. And I like their smiles. I might even go further. I might admit that writers such as these two stand in a more direct relation to the continuity of British letters than do any of the authors whom I shall discuss in this series. I am perfectly prepared to believe that they represent a "better" school of writing than do my own poor neurotics.' (*Listener*, Nov. 4, 1931). So it is not, all things considered, surprising that Mr. Nicolson should go on to ask: 'What, then, is the gulf that separates Mr. Walpole and me in literary matters?'

What indeed? And we might still have asked, even if Mr. Nicolson had re-iterated disagreement instead of agreement. For debate at Mr. Walpole's level could have no place in a serious discussion of modern literature, and there could be no serious discussion of modern literature that should not be an implicit condemnation of Mr. Walpole and Mr. Priestley. Mr. Nicolson, in fact, even if he had been qualified to explain Mr. Eliot and Mr. Joyce and Mrs. Woolf, would have been better employed explaining how Mr. Walpole and Mr. Priestley are, 'in more than one way,' *not* rendering valuable services to literature.

This, of course, he could not have been allowed to do had he so desired. And that is really the final comment on the kind of undertaking he took part in. A serious experiment in cultural education would have to start by doing what is and must remain forbidden.—There *are* authorities that may not be challenged, but none of the kind we are looking for. And there can be none.

As for Mr. Nicolson's embarrassing performance over the wireless, we should remind ourselves that he wrote in *Some People* a book of a certain distinction and that his *Tennyson* and his *Swinburne* are not negligible. These books are the work of a cultivated man of some talent, and his case is the more interesting, and the more illustrative of the times. These are the times in which the acquiring of taste and discrimination and 'sensitiveness of intelligence, is probably harder than ever before in the history of civilization. The *Listener*, in which Mr. Nicolson's talks were printed, reminds us—none the less for the good quality of much of its contents—of his real excuse. In the environment it represents, the tropical profusion of topics and vocabularies and the absence of a cultural grammar and syntax, what chance had he?

Such an environment does not favour 'sensitiveness of intelligence,' which, as Arnold tells us, produces 'deference to a standard higher than one's own habitual standard.' And where is such a standard to be found? So a man may discuss 'matters of taste and intellect' with the best people, and never be troubled even by the ghost of authority. And, now himself authority, so far from being able to induce 'sensitiveness of intelligence' in his listeners, he is himself demoralized, and can tell them seriously that the 'modernists' (conforming to progressive evolution, and interpreting man's unconquerable mind) preach: 'Sex is a form of food; do not starve it, yet do not guzzle' (*Listener*, Nov. 25).

With no standards above, inherent in a living tradition that gives them authority, education can be only a matter of so much more machinery, geared to the general machine of civilization. I could produce the familiar evidence from the field of democratic adult education (lectures on Walpole and Priestley, etc.), but there has been much devoted work, and here, in any case, I would rather not risk being thought to take pleasure in irony.

Standards above, invested with effective authority—were there ever any? Were things ever much different? That such questions can be asked (as they commonly are) brings home the completeness of the change. There is no room here even to hint at the kind of evidence that can be marshalled. I can only reply that before the last century, in, say, Johnson's time, it never occurred to anyone to question that there were, in all things, standards above the level of the ordinary man. That this was so, and the advantage the ordinary man derived, might be brought home by a study (one is in fact being written) of the memoirs and autobiographies, which exist in considerable numbers, of persons of the humblest origin who raised themselves to intellectual distinction and culture. Johnson's own appeal to the 'common reader,' which is sometimes invoked in support of the democratic principle in criticism, has (odd that I should have to say it!) an opposite force. It testifies how far Johnson was from suspecting that there could ever be a state of affairs like that existing now. He could rejoice to concur with the 'common reader' because taste was then in the keeping of the educated who, sharing a homogeneous culture, maintained in tradition a surer taste than any that is merely individual can be, and he could not have

imagined such an authority being seriously challenged. To-day, as the Editors of *Scrutiny* pointed out in their first editorial, there is no such common reader.

And yet there are some (most readers of *Scrutiny*, let us say) to whom the substance of this essay is commonplace, otherwise it would not have been worth writing: where there are some to whom it is commonplace there are some to whom the commonplace has not come home in all its force. This is to suggest that full recognition from those capable of it is worth striving for; and that implies more. It is certainly not to suggest any simple prescription. For if what Matthew Arnold, pondering the Literary Influence of Academies, said seventy years ago might still be said, it would be with a very different accent:

‘ It is not that there do not exist in England, as in France, a number of people perfectly well able to discern what is good, in these things, from what is bad; but they are isolated, they form no powerful body of opinion, they are not strong enough to set a standard. . . . Ignorance and charlatanism. . . are always trying to pass off their wares as excellent, and to cry down criticism as the voice of an insignificant, over-fastidious minority; they easily persuade the multitude that this is so when the minority is scattered about as it is here. . . . ’

F. R. LEAVIS.

## EAGLES AND TRUMPETS FOR THE MIDDLE CLASSES

THERE is an interesting exception to the rule that in contemporary civilisation the poets are allowed a place of but little importance. No doubt, in general, they are sufficiently ignored. Even if (as is sometimes claimed for them) they express our life at its point of most conscious intensity, they are rarely disturbed in the privacy of their self-expression. And so far as any direct influence is concerned they are clearly less important in the community than their historical or mythical predecessors, the bards, the skalds and the prophets. These spoke with the voice both of God and of the People. Our modern poets normally make claim to no such authority. Yet there is one kind of national emergency in which even they have their moments. This comes usually during a reversion to a state of primitive excitement like that which gave the legendary bards their distinction, and it comes most often when a war is waged with some rival community.

When a modern nation goes to war, it experiences, during the early stages of the struggle, a species of folk-ecstasy, and it then feels a distinct need for some bard, prophet or poet laureate who will associate its new fury with the ancient heroics. This is the opportunity of the 'poet.' (I use the word, not to suggest any literary merit, but to denote a generally acknowledged office). If the poet experiences the new feeling at about the same level as his fellows and can express it with technical skill, he may suddenly find himself possessed of unexpected influence. This is especially true of modern wars, since these are won, more than ever before, not by the skill of the actual combatants, but by the preservation of the *morale* of the whole nation. It is in forming and maintaining this *morale* that the poet once more finds a national function. It may be interesting to look, from the social rather than the literary point of view, at the play of