

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

CLASS-WAR CRITICISM

THE NOVEL TO-DAY, by Philip Henderson (Bodley Head, 7/6).

Mr. Henderson's thesis is that since 'the central issue of our age is the class-struggle' no writer can avoid being 'in one camp or the other,' and 'the full force of every genuinely creative, free and honest spirit must be directed' necessarily 'against the social order which maintains' 'the constraints, tyrannies and shams which oppress' man. He aims at dealing in a short book with the novelists of the whole of post-war Europe and America and their background from this point of view. Unfortunately Mr. Henderson has no adequate critical apparatus with which to tackle such a mass. He has one simple criterion: subject-matter, or as he would say, ideological content, and he thinks that by retailing the plot of a novel you can assess it and its author. This does not carry conviction, and the book's thesis suffers from the handling it gets. Practically every general proposition Mr. Henderson makes—and a disproportionately large amount of the book is in general terms—is either arguable, highly questionable or false, which is irritating even to a reader predisposed to sympathy and therefore unlikely to move anyone but the converted. There is a good deal of elementary anti-Fascist matter, which one hopes may do some good to the circulating library reader who picks this book up, and some of this—such as the placing of Mr. Eliot's unwholesome *After Strange Gods*—is all to the good.

It is on the positive side that the book fails. Mr. Henderson says originally that he merely 'attempted to discuss the way in which a few outstanding authors have attempted to solve the problems of living,' and if he had done so he would have performed a service. But he has not the personal sensibility that is required. Reading Mr. Henderson on the revolutionary and traditional novelists you get an insight into what the study of literature will be like after the Revolution, for of course the academic study of literature will be managed by the Hendersons and Charqueses, just as inevitably as the literary reviews will be run by the Alec Browns and Amabel Williams-Ellises. It is sad for some of us,

though no doubt reassuring to others, to see that in essentials (that is, as far as literature is concerned) the new gang won't differ materially from the old gang. Mr. Henderson unfortunately is not revolutionary at all. Aside from having another set of theoretical *clichés* to flourish, he is just the academic lecturer in English we all know. There is the same parading of platitudes, the same hostility to anything that threatens his spiritual complacency, the same lumping together under arbitrary heads of writers on different planes, the same club spirit, the same inability to recognize an ass in a lion's skin, the same muddled self-contradiction, the same inability to make value-judgments and the same substitution for them of 'ideas' and generalizations divorced from any actuality in experience, the same helplessness where particular analysis is needed and the same falling-back instead on incompatible judgments borrowed with or without acknowledgment from all the quarters of the compass (Mr. Henderson boxes it from Wyndham Lewis to Granville Hicks) ; all with the same depressing effect on the student.

Mr. Henderson's criticism is not revolutionary because it is not based on any fundamental, deeply-felt reorientation, he has no real insight into the problems he pretends to attack. For instance, he can label Lawrence 'a latter-day Baptist [see Mr. Eliot] and a Noble Savage' [W. Lewis]—either of which is silly and both together ridiculous. Similarly there is a long account of the plot of *Strange Glory*, and a classing of L. H. Myers with Charles Morgan, almost identical with that which recently appeared, over another signature, in *The Criterion*. It turns out moreover that his animus against Myers—he mentions *The Root and the Flower* only to spurn it—is due to the criticism made in *Strange Glory* of the materialism of Soviet Russia, though the character who makes it ends his criticism with the optimistic declaration that 'Regeneration is there.' Mr. Henderson cannot forgive any writer who concerns himself with anything less external than the class-struggle and the Fascist-Communist battlefield, though he argues in his section called 'The New Humanism' that 'the revolutionary novel sets itself to a creation of a new man . . . it will set before itself the conception of a classless society where man, free from oppression at last, will direct all his energies to the creation of a world worthy of himself.' What this free, leisured hygienic

society will then find itself concerned with, one ventures to believe, is the nature of a world and a life worthy of itself, with in fact precisely those 'barren metaphysical problems,' discussed in terms of living in *The Root and the Flower*, which Mr. Henderson despises but which may turn out after all to be his 'things that lie at the root of all social life.' And it is typical of the muddled and superficial spirit in which Mr. Henderson approaches his subject that we can find him incidentally praising the French novel because 'Since Stendhal the novel in France has tended to become more and more a medium for the dissemination of ideas and the statement of values.' He is again in this the academic lecturer whose right hand knoweth not what his left hand doeth.

Mr. Henderson's superficiality exposes his whole thesis—which was worthy of a better exponent—to damaging comment. Whether the artist should throw himself in the narrow spirit Mr. Henderson desiderates into the social warfare of his time and whether he cannot do the right cause better service by devoting himself to the maintenance of its best values by the means proper to his art is still arguable. Posterity has mostly felt that 'Milton quenched his eyes in the service of a vulgar and unworthy faction' and would have been a better poet—that is, of more use to society—if he hadn't. There are the notorious cases of Jane Austen and Sir Thomas Browne, who have always been considered valuable writers by posterity, but from whose writings no one would conclude that civic and European upheavals were taking place around them. On the other hand, the argument that because Shelley's more ambitious poems have revolutionary ideals they must be good poetry has always been made by people with the best intentions: yet the methods of literary criticism can demonstrate that such poetry may nevertheless, and does in Shelley's case, support and promote undesirable ways of feeling, that this is their real and inevitable though unconscious 'propaganda.' To ignore the methods of literary criticism is therefore dangerous, and Mr. Henderson actually falls into dangerous errors, as of putting forward Hemingway as 'a far more vital writer than any of these tepid stylists [Myers, etc.]. The more positive value of his books is to be found in the courageous and stoical attitude of his heroes, their freedom from self-pity and their self-control in an age of tortured nerves and publicly bleeding hearts.' It would be more

salutary for the spiritual health of Mr. Henderson's party if the Communist literary critics diagnosed literature as literature before certifying or condemning it on ideological grounds. Mr. Granville Hicks has recently put it on record that he finds in Mrs. Mitchison's *We Have Been Warned* (reviewed in *Scrutiny*, Sept., 1935) 'the bursting forth of life itself' of true revolutionary literature. A similar absence of literary—which is thus more than literary—sensitivity is exhibited by Mr. Henderson habitually. He argues that Mr. Wyndham Lewis is an unsuccessful satirist because he does not direct his satire against a social object, and he subsequently puts forward Mr. Alec Brown as an important revolutionary novelist because he does ; yet Mr. Wyndham Lewis's satire is evidently what it is because its author is a hard-boiled self-indulgent egotist, and he would remain so as a novelist even if, like Mr. Alec Brown, his self-assertion had taken the form of backing the political party Mr. Henderson thinks will save us: however much it may be in Mr. Brown's favour that his heart is in the right place, from the point of view of literature Mr. Brown the novelist is just another and even worse Richard Aldington. Mr. Henderson would have been more successful as a propagandist if he had possessed such perceptions, for no one but the converted could believe after reading their novels that Mr. Alec Brown or M. André Malraux had in their very different ways anything valuable to contribute to the new spirit of man. No competent disinterested reader could be in doubt about the comparative value of Mr. Brown's *Daughters of Albion* and Mr. Myers's *The Root and the Flower* in freeing man from 'the constraints, tyrannies and shams which oppress him.' One would have thought M. Malraux's latest novel a considerable embarrassment to the revolutionary party ; and the nature of the violent material he works through in *La Condition Humaine*, with the journalistic method of slinging it together, could equally well, with a superficial change of doctrine, have come from a Fascist writer. And before hailing all fictions which deal in social problem material the left-wing critic might ask himself what purpose such a piece of propaganda can hope to serve, whether its author should not have been employed in doing something more worth doing and consequently harder, whether he is not indulging himself and his comrades by preaching to the converted. And also, what is the

quality of the preaching. The harm that novels like *We Have Been Warned* and *To Tell the Truth* can do to the socialist cause in the minds of the only kind of people they could hope to affect—that is, the better educated reading public—must be considerable, not less for the unfortunate impression that they, together with Mr. Alec Brown's and similar novels, give of an absence of any standards of taste, together with a terrifying kind of complacency, in the English mouthpieces of the literary movement that Mr. Henderson hails.

On the other hand, Mr. Henderson's lack of literary sensibility has made him overlook left-wing novelists whose achievements if examined would have successfully illustrated his thesis. He only refers casually to Grace Lumpkin, for instance (in one sentence with half-a-dozen *uncomparable* names) and does not mention James Farrell at all, yet such remarkable works of art as her *To Make My Bread* and his *Studs Lonigan*, which are in their very different ways examinations by means proper to the novel of the relation between individual and environment and which logically point the revolutionary moral, do genuinely reveal the unsatisfactoriness of Mr. Forster's *œuvre* and the limitations of Mrs. Woolf's (to take two points Mr. Henderson repeatedly tries to make in a blustering way). Most literary critics of any seriousness have long been aware of the weakness inherent in Mr. Forster's position as a novelist and the precariousness of Mrs. Woolf's, but they will probably feel that Mr. Henderson's ready explanation of these shortcomings is both simple and crude and that an investigation that started in practical criticism would go further and effect more.

Mr. Henderson is in fact an academic critic in the final damning sense: that he is out-of-date in being behind the experience of his time. Reliable report¹ says that Alexei Tolstoy, whose novels Mr. Henderson offers us as an example of 'a literature whose boldness, vitality and optimism contrasts sharply with' the effete literatures produced by writers like Lawrence, Myers, Forster, V. Woolf . . . —that Alexei Tolstoy is just 'the perfect Soviet equivalent to the high-grade *Saturday Evening Post* writer . . . compared by a Russian to Booth Tarkington and Joseph Hergesheimer.' [The whole of Mr. Wilson's letter is of great interest in connection with

¹Edmund Wilson, 'Letters in the Soviet Union,' writing from Russia in *The New Republic* for April 1st, 1936.

Mr. Henderson's subject]. The new man may find the best work of D. H. Lawrence, as of other novelists not in the right camp, of more service than Mr. Henderson can imagine, just as it is said that the post-revolutionary Russians are turning back, dissatisfied with their post-revolutionary fiction, to their own classics. Only literary criticism can guard and protect values, and prevent the new-style Walpoles and Priestleys from 'cashing in on the market' as Mr. Wilson suggests has been done in Russia, with its consequent danger of that lowering of standards and corrupting of values that the left-wing critics, not without help from us merely literary critics, have already discovered elsewhere, and on which they base their theoretical edifices.

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SALAVIN, by Georges Duhamel (Dent, 8/6).

STUDS LONIGAN, by James Farrell (Constable, 8/6).

For the same price you can get either the four novels about Salavin, now first translated into English and issued in one volume, or the three novels about Studs Lonigan, now introduced to the English reader in one volume. Both are good value for money and, as many might say, you can invest it in either niceness or nastiness. There is actually a choice to be made, because the admirer of *Salavin* is likely to find *Studs Lonigan* an intolerable presentation of brutality and the admirer of Mr. Farrell's art is not likely to find permanent nourishment in M. Duhamel's. A study more or less in the void of an attempt by an average man to achieve sainthood can hardly be of much contemporary relevance, and the main source of interest for us lies in noting how infinitely less worthy it must have been if the same theme had been handled by any middlebrow English novelist. The French version has a chastity of style and—especially in the political-club passages in the third book—an intellectual maturity which no unremarkable English novelist could achieve. M. Duhamel's attitude to his subject is also interesting: at first it is neither merely humorous nor actually sentimental, and the result is an unusual kind of pathos, but his detachment rapidly breaks down and the fourth book is unmitigatedly sentimental.

There is no self-indulgent idealizing about Mr. Farrell's writings. If Huck Finn had been a Chicago Irish boy and Mark