

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

RETROSPECT OF A DECADE

In opening our ninth year at such a time as this, the mere bringing out of the new issue, with the implied intention to carry on while that remains possible, seems manifesto enough. The importance of the function that *Scrutiny*, in its own necessarily modest way, exists to serve is to-day generally granted. Eight years ago, we recall, things were different. The purpose of *Scrutiny*, as we conceived it, was plainly enough set forth in the first issue, but that didn't inhibit the chorused and reiterated 'Show your colours!' There was a simple choice to be made, and not to make it and proclaim it was to be guilty of pusillanimity. We remember as representative of the prevailing assumptions and indicative of the pressure of the environment at that time, this comment on our 'political attitude,' made with malicious intent by an eminent young intellectual: 'Well, of course, you're as little Communist as you dare be.'

The assumption that not to be Communist required courage was at that time a natural one. The pressure was certainly tremendous—to wear red, or some colour recognized as its opposite. But that had been a reason for starting *Scrutiny*, and could only be one for continuing to feel that the undertaking was worth persisting with. There was never, as a matter of fact, any hesitation or inexplicitness about our anti-Marxism, this negative being a corollary of our positive position. And our positive position was that, though without doubt the human spirit was not to be thought of as expressing itself in a void of 'freedom,' unconditioned by economic and material circumstances, nevertheless there was a great need to insist on the element of autonomy and to work for the preservation of the humane tradition—a tradition representing the profit of a continuity of experience through centuries of economic and material change. Further, it was an essential part of our position, as we conceived it, *not* to be as positive as some people—possible sympathizers—would desire: we intended *Scrutiny* to stand for the humane tradition as something to be fostered apart from any particular religious creed; and the fostering of a free play of critical intelligence we thought of as essential to the tradition. In this sense *Scrutiny* invites the description 'liberal.'

Such a position could hardly be stigmatized as Fascist. But we got a good deal of free advertisement in young-intellectual organs, which used to attack *Scrutiny* for 'playing into the enemy's hands' by encouraging 'irresponsibility' in the intelligent young and distracting from a clear perception of the clear-cut issues. As the decade wore on we got less advertisement of this kind: Marxist intellectuals became more and more occupied with explaining that Marxist criticism was not what in these attacks it had very militantly represented itself to be. And then, of course, quite recently the Marxist decade came to its sharp close: that chapter ended before the chronological period was quite out.

But Marxist the decade decidedly was. It was also, in literature, as a reviewer in the following pages notes, a very barren decade. Compare it with the nineteen-twenties. The nineteen-twenties were the decade of Joyce, Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, T. F. Powys, the effective publication of *Mauberley*, the discovery of Hopkins and the advent of Yeats as a major poet. The nineteen-thirties started with a Poetic Renaissance. Now at their close one is driven to judge that the making accessible of Isaac Rosenberg (who has not yet been 'discovered,' in spite of his great superiority in interest over Wilfrid Owen) was a more important event in English poetry than any emergence of a new poet. In the novel there was *The Root and the Flower*; but what else is there to mention—at any rate, of cis-Atlantic origin?

The prevalent Marxizing and the barrenness might well seem to be in obviously significant relation, Marxist doctrines about literature and art being what they are. But it would, of course, be unsubtle to insist much on the suggestion of simple cause-and-effect. If the young intelligentsia yielded so readily to the satisfactions of an easy salvationism, explanations may no doubt be reasonably looked for in the menacing state of the world. Politico-economic problems filled the prospect, and unless you supposed you knew of a very simple solution, you could hardly suppose you knew of one at all. Certainly, the kind of political distraction that characterized the decade was very bad for creative work.

But there is one aspect of the unfavourable state of civilization that especially concerns *Scrutiny* and its specific function. In all ages, no doubt, there have been cliques and coteries, and young

writers have founded mutual admiration societies and done their best to make these coincident with the literary world—the world that determines current valuations. But has there ever before been a time when the young aspirant, graduating from his university group, could immediately and without any notable sense of a change find himself in a fraternity that effectively ‘ran’ contemporary letters—‘ran’ them so effectively that he could make a name and a career without even coming in sight of adult standards? The existence of such a state of affairs will be found amply recorded and documented in the eight volumes of *Scrutiny*. The disastrous consequence may be pointed to in the representative career of W. H. Auden, distinguished by his promise at the beginning of the decade.

No one would expect reminders of the nature of standards to be received with gratitude. It seems worth noting, however, in further illustration of the decade, that a little research in back-files will reveal the young, predominantly Left-inclined, *élite* incongruously cocking their snooks at *Scrutiny* from the pages of *The Criterion*—the only attention *Scrutiny* ever got in that promisingly-styled organ. It may perhaps be permissible to record too that, because of such performances there, where we had once looked for judicial criticism by more philosophical standards than ours, we have on occasion thought it necessary to abstain from reviewing books that certainly ought otherwise to have been reviewed: we were anxious not to give the least colour of countenance to the prevailing gang-warfare notion of critical exchange. But to have to confess failure to that extent was a disappointment, for without a serious critical interplay there can hardly be said to be the beginning of a functioning contemporary criticism.

On the other hand we feel that the history of the decade has justified the intentions with which we started. And, conscious as we are of many inadequacies, it would be dishonest to pretend that, so far as one organ can hope to maintain the function of criticism, *Scrutiny* appears to us, when we turn over the back volumes, to have fallen discredibly short in its attempt at maintaining it. Moreover, to have brought and kept together something of an intellectual community, however small, seems to us to have been worth the labour. We shall carry on while we can.

F.R.L.

'NEW WRITING' IN THE 1930's

FOLIOS OF NEW WRITING, Spring, 1940 (Hogarth, 5/-).

New Writing, which announced its own death in the Christmas number, has reappeared under a modified title. 'The critics,' we are told, 'did not want *New Writing* to die,' and indeed the chorus of praise is impressively unanimous, ranging from *The New Statesman* to Sir Hugh Walpole in *The Star*, and from *The Cape Times* to *The Canadian Forum*. The occasion seems appropriate for a brief examination of these claims.

New Writing has set out 'to create a laboratory where the writers of the future may experiment, and where the literary movement may find itself.' From the first it opened its pages to more tentative and experimental work than could obtain publication in the ordinary magazines, and until Autumn, 1938, it excluded criticism. It claimed to be 'first and foremost interested in literature' and independent of any political party, though it refused writers of reactionary or Fascist sentiments. In practice it was from the start an organ of the Left, and the great amount of purely documentary work showed that literature was not its chief concern. Some of this documentary work had considerable interest in itself. But the mere reporting of fragments of experience unrelated to any comprehensive scheme of values can hardly provide more than raw material for the artist, who is committed to the task of clarifying and ordering his experience. When, on the other hand, these writers attempt to do more than record the flux of events, they usually assume a simple framework of Marxian beliefs as the supreme and all-inclusive wisdom. The literary critic will look for some concrete embodiment of this wisdom, and he is not likely to discover it. He will find a certain amount of impartial reporting which may prove a salutary challenge to his own beliefs (though many of these chronicles of oppression, murder and rape show signs of hysteria and sentimentality) and a good deal of propaganda only too obviously written to a theory (especially among the translations). It is still necessary to repeat that over-simplification and the omission of aspects of experience which do not fit can only impoverish the quality of writing.