

THE BARD AND THE PREP-SCHOOL

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG DOG, by Dylan Thomas (Dent, 7/6).

THE BACKWARD SON, a novel by Stephen Spender (Faber and Faber, 7/6).

The work of Dylan Thomas apparently appeals strongly to our contemporary poets. Miss Edith Sitwell (as his publishers announce persistently) wrote of Thomas's first volume: 'A new poet has arisen who shows every promise of greatness. His work is on a huge scale both in theme and structurally, and the form of many of his poems is superb . . . Here alone among the poets of the younger generation is one who could produce sonnets worthy of our great heritage': while Mr. Clifford Dymont thought his prose 'as individual as his poetry, rich in image and metaphor, sometimes as dark as a storm, sometimes as gentle as April sunlight.'

Those of us who don't profess to be so poetically creative would like to ask if within all this hugeness and superbness and this abundance of stormy gestures there is a solid core, the experience created, the emotion felt and realized. We should find the answer to our query, if anywhere, in the 'young poet's' autobiography, for here he may justifiably present his case without equivocation and without evasions. Let us consider, then, what virtues the curious eye may glean from a perusal of these autobiographical pages.

There is, this much is presented to us perhaps too forcibly, a gift for the Trenchant Phrase:

'Gwilym was a tall young man aged nearly twenty, with a thin stick of a body and a spade-shaped face. You could dig the garden with him.'

There is too, a knack of expressive rhythm:

'Mrs. Williams was tall and stout, with a jutting bosom and thick legs, her ankles swollen over her pointed shoes; she was fitted out like a mayoress or a ship, and she swayed after Annie into the best room.'

It is, you see, not only in the images but in the rhythm too, a technique of perpetual exaggeration, almost of distortion. The

objection to it is that, if adopted as a norm, its effectiveness vanishes. One's capacity for being surprised is strictly limited, and only the immaturity of adolescence would fail to realize that such truculent naïveté, such continual bludgeoning of the reader's responsiveness, must inevitably defeat its own ends. When Mr. Thomas confines himself to a caricature-like exposition of crude experiences of physical violence,

' Then Uncle Jim came in like the devil with a red face and a wet nose and trembling, heavy hands. His walk was thick. He stumbled against the dresser and shook the coronation plates, and a lean cat shot booted out from the settle corner,'

or of drunkenness and hysteria,

' Mr. Farr tapped me on the shoulder ; his hand fell from a great height and his thin bird's voice spoke from a whirring circle on the ceiling,'

or of the agonies of adolescence or of the nameless horrors of childhood,

' Up above, sat one-eyed, dead-eyed, sinister, slim, ten-notched Gwilym, loading his gun in Gallows Farm. We crawled and rat-tatted through the bushes, hid at a whistled signal and crouched there, waiting for the crack of a twig or the secret breaking of boughs,'

we can accept his rhetorical imagination as the serio-comic exuberance of a school-boy. But when he starts to generalize about these experiences it is more difficult to accept him as an adult.

In effecting this generalization Thomas dons the mantle of the distraught romantic genius, a mantle which the overgrown schoolboy is perhaps not unfamiliar with. His Welsh nonconformist background effectively sets off this posture in that it encourages the bardic gesture, the Dionysiac vision, the rapture of hell-fire. The literary parallel with Joyce's Irish-Catholic background is explicitly admitted in the parody title of Thomas's book, in the selection of the incidents described (we have the fanatic preacher, childhood fear of death and the flesh-creeping bogey, terror in the suburbs of sordidness and drunken hysteria in the precincts of bars), even perhaps in the violent quality of the images

and in certain rhythmical tricks of style. I do not deny that much of the later part of the autobiography (particularly the section called *One Warm Saturday*) is, if reminiscent, as authentic as the descriptions of childhood, but there is nonetheless something a little suspicious about the deliberation with which Thomas chooses his rôle. These anecdotes assume an attitude ; but artistically they are least unsatisfactory when they admit that they are utterly without point. The childhood section called *Extraordinary Little Cough* is successful—if its painful quality may properly be described as success—because it is content with the simplest statement of a sequence of events.

The trouble with Dylan Thomas grown up is that his interests—his terrors and raptures and desires—are identical with those of Dylan Thomas the child. Because he is in fact no longer a child he feels that he must needs falsify these fears and desires, must attribute to them an importance which they cannot properly pretend to. His writing then becomes pivoted on himself, an orgy of self-commiseration. He is the bard, the 'last romantic,' buffeted and maltreated by a despicable Fortune :

'And I never felt more a part of the remote and overpressing world, or more full of love and arrogance and pity and humility, not for myself alone but for the living earth I suffered on and for the unfeeling systems in the upper air . . . I mooched in a half-built house with the sky stuck in the roof and cats on ladders and a wind shaking through the bare bones of the bedrooms.'

So vaguely noble a statement of the pathetic fallacy sounds curiously old-fashioned, and prepares us for this transparent presentation of a jaded twentieth-century Byron :

'Outside all holiday, like a young man doomed for ever to the company of his maggots, beyond the power of the high or ordinary, sweating sun-awakened power and stupidity of the summer flesh on a day and a world out, he caught the ball that a small boy had whacked into the air with a tin tray, and rose to throw it back . . . The lone wolf playing ball,'

and for the *fin-de-siècle malaise* of the rhythmical swan-song of the concluding paragraphs :

' Up the rotten, bruising, mountainous stairs he climbed, in his sickness, to the passage where he had left the one light burning in the end room. He tapped all the doors and whispered her name. He beat on the doors and shouted, and a woman, dressed in a vest and a hat, drove him out with a walking stick . . .

' Then he walked out of the house on to the waste space and under the leaning cranes and ladders. The light of the one weak lamp in a rusty circle fell across the brickheaps and the broken wood and the dust that had been houses once, where the small and hardly known and never-to-be-forgotten people of the dirty town had lived and loved and died and, always, lost.'

Of course this sort of thing is comparatively innocent, particularly since Thomas, with a kind of inverted conceit, laughs at himself for doing it. (' Did you see the dewdrops in her hair? Stop talking to the mirror like a man in a magazine.'). But the next step, that which presents Dylan Thomas as the god-given laureate mumbling his magic incantations to the spirit of Earth, is perhaps more vicious in that it stands, with its untrammelled genius that defies intelligibility, beyond criticism by all but those who are likewise ' inspired.' Inspiration may be convenient. The reader may be bamboozled into believing that so portentous a concern for one's own neuroses as Thomas manifests in the ' surrealist ' prose of *The Map of Love* must mean that those neuroses are intrinsically more interesting than the adolescent experiences described in the autobiography ; or that Thomas's incomprehensible poems must be more profound than his few comprehensible ones—such as *The hand that signed a paper felled a city*, which voices a sentiment admirable enough but in no wise startlingly original—might lead one to expect. The incantatory rhythm and amorphous images no doubt lull receptivity ; and in more ways than one Mr. Thomas reminds me of Swinburne. Certainly he would be an artist of the same ethos if he could—as he cannot except perhaps in his least pretentious moments—be called an artist at all.

On the first page of Mr. Spender's prep-school anecdotes we find this:

' The cat and dog, who were good friends, were playing in the garden. No one drove them out into the world, no one

beat them with rods, no one shut them up in class-rooms and made them learn lessons, no one forcibly introduced them to other cats and dogs who would probably do their best to tear them into pieces' ;

after which we settle down to an unremitting wail. This book is singularly unambitious since although it is optimistically termed a novel it seems to recount the sadistic and masochistic details of its hero's ignominious suffering with painfully indiscriminate verisimilitude. Mr. Spender's publishers claim that the 'discoveries' he makes in the world of childhood are 'unique' and that they 'add a new chapter of surprising richness to the imaginative history of his generation,' but it is very difficult to be surprised by either the newness or the richness of the prep-school theme and the pancake-flat mediocrity of the prose. As to whether Mr. Spender's vintage 1920 is more or less 'dated' than Mr. D. T.'s vintage 1900 I wouldn't like to commit myself, but it is certainly duller and more inert. So may-be, relatively speaking, there's life in the young dog, yet.

W. H. MELLERS.

Mr. C. G. Hutchinson writes that T. R. Barnes's criticism, in his review of *Village Life and Labour*, that the bibliography 'shows no critical discrimination whatever' should be modified in view of the following facts: (1) that his recommendation of 'a reading of the complete works of the men from whom etc.' was an error; he had intended 'a reading of complete works by . . . etc.'; (2) that the book (or the bibliography) was means for a wider audience than schools.

Babel: A Multi-Lingual Critical Review, is another gallant war-time enterprise. Like *The Music Review* (see *Scrutiny* for March last), it has reached its second issue. Edited by Peter G. Lucas, John Fleming, G. Gordon Mosely, with a number of assistants. Price 1/6. Bowes and Bowes, Cambridge.

WHAT BOYS AND GIRLS READ

WHAT DO BOYS AND GIRLS READ? by A. J. Jenkinson
(Methuen, 7/6).

This very interesting and valuable book is a statistical examination of what boys and girls between the ages of 11+ and 15+ in secondary schools, and 11+ and 14+ in senior schools really do read, both of their own free-will and at the behest of their teachers. Mr. Jenkinson's painstakingly analysed figures are based on answers to a questionnaire sent to 2900 children, a group large enough to be fairly representative: they will depress, though not, I think, unduly surprise, the reader. Indeed, he will probably find here what oft he thought, though ne'er so well saw tabulated.

The first thing that strikes one among the mass of facts here assembled, is the quantity of books read, at all ages, by all classes of pupils. Clearly, as the author remarks, there is no need to put the establishment of the reading habit among the aims of English teaching; they have all got it quite badly enough already. The secondary school boy reads about five books a month on his own, his sister about six; for the senior school the figures are slightly lower—about four and five respectively—and these are real books, magazines and bloods being counted separately.

Mr. Jenkinson's analysis of the changes of taste during four years of school life is fascinating, and his main conclusions about these changes he summarizes as follows: 'children of these ages (as of others) must pass through certain stages of development in order to pass beyond them; adult tastes are imposed on children, and this is a mistake; the really fruitful period in secondary (or post-primary education) is in the years *after* 15+; at these ages devotion to the cinema, to bloods, to newspaper reading, to childish or boyish reading of any kind is not reprehensible; the reading matter . . . apart from that which is read for the information it contains, is of two main sorts; that which promotes growing up, and that which compensates for the difficulties of growing up.'

He classifies the books read, as School Stories, Detective, Home Life, Adventure, Love, Historical, Collections (Annuals), and Technical; and we can see how, for example, the taste for school stories lessens as the child grows older. At 12+ such books, among which the 'William' stories are the most popular, account for