

CRUMBS FROM THE BANQUET

POINTS OF VIEW, by T. S. Eliot, edited by John Hayward.
(Sesame Books, Faber, 3/6).

This selection from Mr. Eliot's prose writings is made under four heads—' literary criticism,' ' dramatic criticism,' ' individual authors ' and ' religion and society.' Mr. John Hayward's efforts at book-making have in the past been attended with considerably more success than is customary in such cases; his achievement in this case is less unequivocal. A circular accompanying the review suggests that the selection might be suitable for use in schools; the shortcomings that I have in mind can best be focussed by saying that that is exactly what it isn't. One can sympathise with Mr. Hayward's difficulties; he was being asked to fill a non-existent gap. To select passages of ' prose ' representative of an author's style and thought is all very well when the author is a C. E. Montague or a Lytton Strachey, whose whole work might have written with an eye to being selected from; but the essence of Mr. Eliot's best critical practice, one might have thought, was its application to the specific situation, its unwillingness to leave a generalization in the air without tying it down to some particular piece of verse or some particular poet. But when you are reconnoitring an author's work for salient points, it is inevitably the generalization that takes the eye and the *ad hoc* criticism that is pruned off. And so we find a series of little gobbets of a page or two or three apiece, headed (titles by Mr. Hayward) ' Poetic Imagery,' ' Metrical Innovation,' ' Dissociation of Sensibility,' and the schoolboy or girl who reads this book will find, not the careful scrutiny of language that brought to light a whole age and revealed new possibilities to our own age, but a series of slogans (' tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace ') divorced from the situations which they elucidated so brilliantly, like a series of formulae with no experimental data—very few science masters would subscribe to that kind of teaching.

A note at the beginning mentions, though, ' the author's approval '; and one might ask whether there is nothing in Mr. Eliot's development to justify Mr. Hayward's surgery. No attempt is made to present Mr. Eliot's ideas as developing; a quotation about tradition from *After Strange Gods* immediately precedes *Tradition*

and the Individual Talent. But this last appears, happily, almost in full; and the other selections are sufficiently diverse to obtain some bird's-eye view of the shift of Mr. Eliot's ideas.

The essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* is among those demonstrating Mr. Eliot's method at its best. " ' Interpretation, ' " he says in *The Function of Criticism*, ' is only legitimate when it is not interpretation at all, but merely putting the reader in possession of facts which he would otherwise have missed. ' This is the genuine disinterestedness of science, as opposed to the pseudo-science of the literary-criticism-branch-of-psychology type; and it is this quality that pervades the early essays—*Andrew Marvell*, *The Metaphysical Poets*, and the one I am considering. It controls the ordering of the prose, and is the chief source of its vigour. The sense in reading that every word in every sentence is significant, and that any omission would leave a hole in the structure derives from Mr. Eliot's desire to circumscribe exactly the situation he is dealing with; to use words as a scientist might use symbols, putting the reader in possession of facts which he, Eliot, is in possession of, by reproducing them with as complete accuracy as the language available is capable of. The central ideas, of ' impersonality, ' and of the ' historic sense, ' are of the same kind as scientific hypotheses; not critic-as-artist creations, but principles of investigation, armed with which the reader can penetrate without confusion fields of verse hitherto regarded as treacherous and obscure. Mr. Eliot reclaimed seventeenth century verse from obscurity in the same sense in which an engineer reclaims a swamp, or in which Galileo reclaimed the stellar universe from the astrologers.

The author of *Tradition and the Individual Talent* was an empiricist. The apparent large-scale logical cohesion of the essay dissolves away on close inspection. Although the argument has the appearance of being the work of a distinguished theoretician examining the specific case, it turns out to be the great experimentalist turning over his results to the student. Yet the sense that more than *ad hoc* guidance is possible, that there are general principles somewhere anterior, haunts the essay, and haunts its author. He feels he cannot let the matter rest there, and goes in search of underlying assumptions. The direction in which they lie is clear enough; the province of ethics is one from whose bourne very few literary critics return safely. And with the passage of years we see

Mr. Eliot withdrawing from the hand-to-hand fight with fact, the absorbing attention to the word on the page, and struggling to make his peace with morality.

The shift of attention is marked by a change of subject. The seventeenth century disappears from the field in favour of the nineteenth and twentieth, where, less hampered by exact knowledge, the moralist finds a freer hand. Mr. Eliot himself draws attention to the change when it is well under way. 'The lectures,' he says in the Preface to *After Strange Gods*, 'are not designed to set forth, even in the most summary form, my opinions of the work of contemporary writers: they are concerned with certain ideas in illustration of which I have drawn upon the work of the few modern writers whose work I know. I am not primarily concerned either with their absolute importance or their importance relative to each other . . . I ascended the platform of these lectures in the role of moralist.' And the avowed object of *After Strange Gods* was to produce a Revised Version of *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. He says, significantly, 'The problem, naturally, does not seem to me so simple as it seemed then, nor could I treat it now as a purely literary one.' And we see something of the extent of the departure from the former practice when we read, 'the chief clue to the understanding of most contemporary Anglo-Saxon literature is to be found in the decay of Protestantism.' The recipe now for comprehension—it is implicit in the whole concept of 'orthodoxy'—is to ask no questions, but throw your witches in and see if they drown, and run no risk of endangering your principles: a reversal of the earlier practice. It is no longer possible to say of Mr. Eliot what Mr. Eliot said of Blake: 'because he was not distracted, or frightened, or occupied in anything but exact statements, he understood.' Mr. Eliot is distracted by the ethical generalizations he wishes to consolidate, and his object is no longer to understand, but to convert. His language now loses its analytic nicety, and masses itself to persuade, cajole, bludgeon, as he attacks the unseen Satanic opponent. 'But as the majority is capable neither of strong emotion nor of strong resistance, it always inclines to admire passion for its own sake, unless instructed to the contrary; and if somewhat deficient in vitality, people imagine passion to be the surest evidence of vitality.' (*After Strange Gods*). Failure to agree to the proclaimed principle can only produce an *impasse*: 'I confess that

I do not know what to make of a generation that ignores these considerations.' When he returns to the seventeenth century now, the subject he chooses is *Pascal's 'Pensées,'* and his criteria of relevance have changed remarkably. 'It is no concern of this essay,' he says, 'whether the Five Propositions condemned at Rome were really maintained by Jansenius in his book *Augustinus*, or whether we should deplore or approve the consequent decay . . . of Port-Royal.' With this we can readily concur; but it is unlikely that we should have in mind the reason which immediately follows. 'It is impossible to discuss the matter without becoming involved as a controversialist either for or against Rome.' Even if one accepts this as true, it is hardly the kind of circumstance which one would expect to concern a disinterested critic.

From this time on Mr. Eliot's Penelope is in sight. *In Religion and Literature* he makes clear that the time for equivocation has passed. 'In ages like our own . . . it is . . . necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading, especially of works of the imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards.' And the nature of the majority of problems is settled in advance: education, for example (*Modern Education and the Classics*): 'Education is a subject which cannot be discussed in a void: our questions raise other questions, social, economic, financial, political. And the bearings are on more ultimate problems even than these: to know what we want in education we must know what we want in general, we must derive our theory of education from our philosophy of life. The problem turns out to be a religious problem.' One somehow suspected that it would. As Mr. Eliot stands with top-hat on the table and sleeves rolled at the elbow, it would be surprising if the rabbit failed to emerge. It is not surprising, then, to find that *The Idea of a Christian Society* is almost exclusively pre-occupied with generalization, and when the particular judgment occurs its context is prescribed: 'It would perhaps be more natural, as well as in better conformity with the Will of God, if there were more celibates and if those who were married had larger families.' The wheel has come full circle. Mr. Eliot has re-emerged from the thickets of ethical controversy, and can apply himself to the specific case with complete assurance. To realize the most abstract of ideas through the agency of the immediate occasion has been and is one of the most powerful motive forces in Mr. Eliot's verse; but to bring

Marina or *East Coker* to mind here isn't to convince oneself that Mr. Eliot's critical practice has been improved by being brought into conformity with his poetic practice.

The worst, then, that one can fairly say of Mr. Hayward's selection is that he has accepted a *fait accompli*. If generalization is to become Mr. Eliot's critical métier, then this is merely a fitting garland in his honour; but to those who ten years ago thought him the most distinguished critic that English literature had seen for over a century, it will seem a poor funeral wreath.

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IDEALS AND ILLUSIONS, by L. Susan Stebbing (Watts, 8/6).

This is 'popular philosophy' only in the sense that it is, as the publishers claim, a book for everyman. There is no claptrap, uplift, or false simplification about it. It shows in fact how hard it is to say when a discussion is 'philosophical' and when it is not. For instance, Professor Stebbing makes telling criticisms of what might be called the philosophical framework of Carr's *Twenty Years Crisis*, and her examination has made me feel that in reading that in many ways admirable book, I had been superficial in discounting the deficiencies Professor Stebbing exposes, with the reflection that after all Carr didn't profess to be a philosopher, and one couldn't expect everything. For it is precisely the same qualities of keen insight and careful analysis which Carr exercises elsewhere on the international scene between the wars which he lamentably fails to bring into play in the passages which Professor Stebbing justly describes as nonsensical. And there seems no good reason why he should be excused for talking nonsense about political theory just because it is international relations that he is paid for knowing about. If Carr's flounderings are less fatal to his argument as a whole than one might expect, it is only because all that argument requires could be summarized in two or three commonplaces. (The political philosopher, as Mr. Plamenatz remarked a few years ago in an excellent book¹ must not be afraid of commonplaces, and it is one of Professor Stebbing's merits that she never goes out of her way to avoid them.)

If the first chapter of the book exemplifies the relevance of

¹*Consent, Freedom and Political Obligation*.