

## ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP, ENGLISH AND AMERICAN

*ESSAYS IN CRITICISM AND RESEARCH*, by Geoffrey Tilotson  
(Cambridge University Press, 15/-).

*THE POETRY OF MATTHEW ARNOLD*, a commentary by  
C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (Humphrey Milford, Oxford  
University Press, 12/6).

Some years ago Mr. F. W. Bateson's *English Poetry and the English Language* occasioned a lively debate in this journal over his claim that literary history could be studied apart from criticism. Mr. Tilotson's preface raises similar problems, in spite of an appearance of greater subtlety. He begins promisingly with the statement that the critic must concentrate on the material manifestation of literature, its embodiment in words. But a little later, quoting Mark Pattison's remark that an appreciation of Milton is the last reward of consummated scholarship, he propounds as a 'positive critical ideal' the reconstruction of a work 'as it lay under the sabbath eye of its author.' 'I am assuming,' he adds naively, 'that the poem is a good one.' Plainly this begs all the questions: while the critic will of course make sure that the apparent lifelessness of a work is not due to some ignorance of relevant information on his own part, some accident of changed conventions or diction, his chief concern will still be to decide whether or not the work has significance beyond its own age and environment. And this is inseparable from the process of determining its value. Perhaps Mr. Tilotson would not disagree, but if he thinks this means a crude reading into the past of modern interests in the manner of those 'small creative essayists' whom he so justly castigates, he should look again at Mr. Eliot's passage about 'the mind of Europe' in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Our suspicions are aroused, and however much he protests that the function of historical reconstruction is inseparable from that of criticism, we feel that the weight always tends to fall on the side of scholarship. He takes no account of the many insidious ways in which scholarship can become a mask for critical prejudice. The critic, we know, must have a 'highly developed sense of fact,' but the facts to which he directs his attention will inevitably be selected by a more or less conscious critical choice. It is as well to admit from the start that this interaction is unavoidable: we are not dealing with the measurable objects of exact science.

Other sections of the preface deal with the dangers of textual inaccuracy, misquotation, lack of attention to the contemporary meanings of words and the tendency to read back the present into the past. With most of this we can agree, and the examples are usually convincing<sup>1</sup> (*Seven Types of Ambiguity* is, one must admit,

<sup>1</sup>But even these are not always questions of pure scholarship: for example, the suggested correction of pointing in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* still leaves the interpretation a matter for critical judgment.

fair game, though Mr. Tillotson does it considerably less than justice.) But when it comes to defending the relevance of biography with the suggestion that a critic learning of Keats's youthful pugnacity 'may be led to notice, perhaps for the first time, some quality in the bone and flesh of the poems themselves,' we must protest. A critic who cannot discern such qualities without the help of biography will be in great danger of finding in the poems many things which are not there at all.

I have spent some time over Mr. Tillotson's preface because its principles are supposed to underlie the rather heterogeneous collection of essays which follows. Some of these are just scholarly notes—the derivation of *Rasselas*, the exact dates of certain performances of *The Alchemist* and *Othello*, and, appropriately, a detailed bibliographical account of the reprinting of Housman's contributions to a college magazine. We are not surprised to find that they are balanced by a group of essays only vaguely connected with literature which recall in their polite inanity and facetiousness the fourth leaders of *The Times*. This irritating tone is found in work of higher pretensions (*Epithets in English Poetry*, *William Morris and Machines*); working upwards we come to imitations of Virginia Woolf—the essay on Bacon, which the preface claims as a new approach, is sheer pastiche: 'He seems often, indeed, to have written with his head severed and placed cleanly before him on the table, an inch or two beyond the farther edge of his manuscript.' For the most part Mr. Tillotson makes a few critical perceptions go a long way, wrapping them up in elaborate wit and elegant cadences, which presumably is what the blurb-writer means by 'a prose full of light-giving surprises.'

It is only fair to say, nevertheless, that the worst essays are the earliest, and that some are more truly critical and not without interest. The notes on Lyly's dramatic prose and the discussion of Elizabethan Decoration would be useful to undergraduates reading English, though they would need warnings against a list of examples which includes lines from *The Passionate Pilgrim*, *Richard II*, *Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale* without adequate discrimination. The attempts to rehabilitate Gray and Collins do not answer Johnson's objections, and he at least cannot be accused of lacking the required scholarship. Mr. Tillotson is at his best in the two essays on Pope and the two on Eighteenth Century Poetic Diction. The latter pair perform a useful corrective function but they attempt to prove too much: it is difficult to believe, however carefully we investigate the reasons for the use of poetic diction, that we shall cease to find most eighteenth century verse after Pope 'intolerably poetical.' The essays on Pope make some interesting minor points, but they miss the essentials—and that indeed is characteristic of the whole book. It seems to be a usual academic fault to concentrate on secondary issues—for fear, perhaps, of being too serious.

*The Poetry of Matthew Arnold* is not criticism, but a commentary on every poem in the collected works (it forms a sort of companion volume to a new complete edition), giving information about

sources, mode of composition, relation to the poet's life, philosophy and so on. The authors claim to have given incidentally an account of the connexion between Arnold's poetry and this thought and to have thrown light on the early cessation of his poetical life. Those who expect to learn something new about Marguerite will be disappointed: the visitors' book of the Hotel Bellevue at Thun was destroyed long ago and the authors drew a blank altogether. The book does contain relevant facts and interesting scraps of biographical material, but no one who had really read Arnold critically could have contemplated an undertaking of this sort. That the critical remarks should take for granted all the accepted academic judgments on the poems is as inevitable as that there should be an appendix by a former Warden of Rhodes House describing the Scholar-Gipsy Country with a sketch map. Almost the only portions which a critic might conceivably find useful are the quotations from letters and the discussion of the change in Arnold's attitude to religion in the notes on *Resignation*, *Empedocles*, the *Obermann* poems and *Rugby Chapel*. The rest is thorough, conscientious and dead. 'It is not true,' said Dr. Richards once, 'to say that criticism is a luxury trade,' but it is almost certainly true of this kind of scholarship.

R. G. Cox.

## SHCHEDRIN: THE RUSSIAN SWIFT

*SHCHEDRIN'S FABLES*, translated by Vera Volkhovsky (*The Pelham Library*. Published by Chatto and Windus, 2/6).

Shchedrin (Saltykov was his real name) lived from 1826 to 1889. Born into the lesser nobility, he was exiled for his first novel but continued to work in the Russian civil service, where he occupied several high positions. He wrote a great deal of satire, the mass of which, according to authorities, had little more than a topical interest. Such is his lengthy *History of a City*, a parody which bears some surface resemblance to *Gulliver's Travels*—though it is more because he is Russia's most famous satirist that he has been called the Russian Swift. However, two of his works—a collection of *Fables* and a novel—are obviously of permanent value, and the translation by Natalie Duddington of the novel, *The Golovlyov Family*,<sup>1</sup> is a book that should rank with Aylmer Maude's and Constance Garnett's translations of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.

Shchedrin has been unjustly neglected in England; his novel as Mrs. Duddington presents it is far more interesting than much Russian writing that has won wide popularity over here. And the publication in a cheap edition of Vera Volkhovsky's neat translations of the *Fables* is an opportunity to draw attention to him.

The Fable is a dangerous art-form, because in the correlation of individual and action with universal and meaning the former is apt

<sup>1</sup>Shchedrin's *Golovlyov Family* translated by Natalie Duddington, used to be obtainable in *Everyman*.