

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

A NOTE ON INTELLECTUAL LIFE IN THE U.S.A.

The peculiarly exposed position, culturally speaking, of America gives an added interest to any news of intellectual life there. Most European reporters, however, concentrate on the 'machine' aspects of American civilization and are chiefly concerned to bring out contrasts with conditions in Europe. We are consequently singularly ill-informed about what corresponds in New York, say, to the literary world (in the more respectable sense) of London or Paris. This is a reason for welcoming what Mlle. Simone de Beauvoir has to say (in *Les Temps Modernes*, December, 1947) about her visit to the U.S.A. in 1947. She went to New York from Paris (where she is a prominent figure in literary circles) eager, in spite of her imperfect command of the language, to make contacts with her 'opposite numbers' in New York.

The editor of a left-wing review told her with a smile that there was nothing worth seeing in New York, no good films, no good books. Apart from Faulkner, there were no living novelists worth reading. He advised her to study the 'classics' of the American tradition and expressed irritation at the French enthusiasm over third-rate sensational American writers. Mlle. de Beauvoir had ample opportunity to confirm that this attitude to literature was not an isolated reaction. She was later invited to a literary party where among the crowds who attended and the abundance of drinks ('encore plus d'alcool que de gens') she was introduced to someone described to her as the most intelligent man in America. She found herself surrounded by a group of writers belonging to yet another advanced left-wing review who (perhaps under the influence of the cocktails) spoke to her in an aggressive tone apparently quite unknown in Parisian literary circles. Their opinions about the relative value of contemporary American novelists were in substance those of the editor of the other review. Some of the heat of the discussion was generated by political differences. These writers, she reports, hated Stalinism with a passion known only to those who had once been Stalinists themselves.

Their chief complaint was of the hard lot of the American intellectual. Their review had a circulation of ten thousand, but what was that in comparison with the millions of the total population? Their feeling of isolation as a group was intensified by the lack of friendships among fellow-writers. Mlle. de Beauvoir's informants further explained that it was extremely difficult to make an honest living as a writer. That conditions are likely to grow worse is one of the conclusions that may be drawn from a *New Directions* pamphlet, *The Fate of Writing in America*, by J. T.

Farrell, who describes the recent changes that have occurred in the American publishing world.

'The war boom demonstrated positively that mass production and distribution in books are both feasible and highly profitable. These developments are irreversible. Their structural consequences are revealed in the tendency toward combination and centralization. Inevitably every phase of book business will become more concentrated than in the past. This concentration will increase the difficulties of operation for small and independent publishers, and it will probably have the effect of requiring a higher initial investment from any newcomers into the field. In other words, the scale of publishing will be enlarged, and money will talk more than ever. It is already common knowledge that books which have the largest advertising budgets most frequently receive prompt and long reviews, and that those selected by a large book club are generally treated as important books by the majority of reviewers. The immediate, if not the permanent reputations of many writers are related to such factors'. Farrell predicts that 'the area of literary freedom will become narrowed, bottle-necked. The serious writer will be pressed into his bohemia, that cultural ghetto of bourgeois society'. (Will be pressed, that is, if he remains passive. Mr. Farrell does not think the writer's case hopeless).

Mlle. de Beauvoir noted that most American writers belong to what amounts to a different class from that of the intellectuals. Hostility between these 'classes' is apparently acute. She reports a collective judgment from the writers' camp on the contributors to the review mentioned above. 'They hate all living writers because they themselves are not alive and cannot write. They need idols to worship because they have no inner resources. First they had Stalin, then it was Trotsky—now they have the American Tradition'.

Mlle. de Beauvoir does not name the review in question and no innuendo is intended here in passing on to the examination of *Partisan Review*, which has now been published here in a 'British' edition for more than a year by *Horizon* in collaboration with Percy Lund Humphries & Co., Ltd. The publisher's announcement describes the review as the most intellectual magazine in America and the most lively, and states that Edmund Wilson recently spoke of it as 'the only first-rate literary magazine now published in the United States'. It appeared regularly as a bi-monthly in 1947.

To judge by the six numbers which appeared in that year, the contributing 'intellectuals' are mostly university teachers or journalists, and although the review is published in New York, the writers are drawn from all parts of America. *PR* No. 5 contains an article by a Mr. Wolfert entitled 'Notes on the American Intelligentsia' in which the true intellectuals are described as belonging to the group which includes 'members of the faculties of the universities and the few writers in the large cities who do independent critical work pitched beyond the level of commercial-

ism'—the group who conceive of their rôle as a devotion to a calling as distinct from 'the journalists of the large city dailies and the writers for the organs of public opinion on a mass scale such as the Luce publications'. A third group is formed by 'the acolytes of Stalinism such as the contributors to the *New Masses*, also the writers on the staff of *PM* and the facile popularizers who disseminate the orthodox views of the party, sugar-pilled for mass consumption'. Within the first group, says Mr. Wolfert, the position of the scholars who maintain their devotion to their calling 'is that of marginal men'. The 'bohemians' in this group include 'commentators on the arts as well as critics of literature and social critics who write from a broader humanistic standpoint'. They, too, are marginal men. Mr. Wolfert lists some of the dangers to which they are subject. Firstly, there is the ever-present temptation to give in to the world by prostituting their talents. Or if they remain loyal, there is an equal danger of succumbing to literary fashions and the snob worship of mediocre talents. The 'bohemian intellectual', he thinks, is most likely to suffer from the lack of stable values and be the first to be taken in by the spurious and the bizarre. 'While the academy is to some extent still in possession of certain standards of criticism drawn from tradition and acquaintance with scientific procedures, the bohemians are in the very nature of their social role deprived of intellectual stability. The defect of their virtue is to be receptive to charlatanism which has the aura of creative originality; all too often they admire the grotesque and the startling regardless of its meaning and content. Thus in the little magazines one finds genuinely valid material together with a mass of indigestible jargon. This stuff is often concocted by people who live on the fringes of the avant-garde and who assimilate the mannerisms of this group for reasons other than a concern with ideas or values—reasons that they themselves are not aware of. They are the parasites of intellectualism, who believe themselves to be possessed of originality and critical acumen merely because they consider themselves to be 'different'; their work is no more than a product of their social and psychological maladjustment—a maladjustment not strained through any objectifying process. An inverted snobbishness compensates for their alienation from philistine norms and their bohemian existence protects them from social pulverization. Actually they are brothers under the skin of their philistine counterparts'.

It may be making too much of too little evidence to suppose that 'Bohemia' as described by Mr. Wolfert is the *ambiance* against which *PR* has to struggle hardest. The struggle may be said to be successful—for if the contributors are too slavish in taking up merely fashionable themes, themes dictated presumably by others, they take them up in a critical spirit and generally to drop them as not being worthy of further notice. But if the contributors are intellectuals of Mr. Wolfert's first group, what of the readers? The only hint I could gather was from a series of advertisements well

calculated to catch a certain level of sophistication, and if so, a document of sociological interest:

'A girl whom we know only slightly said to us recently, "I've read the standard authors; what can you recommend next?"

"What do you mean by standard authors?" we asked.

"Oh, you know", she answered, "Miller . . . Patchen . . ."

Although we carry all the current and a few out-of-print titles of both Miller and Patchen, we feel that the young lady carries specialisation a little too far . . . we try to have on hand at all times a representative selection of the creative and critical work of those authors, ancient and modern, foreign and domestic, who have won a place in the library of the serious, sophisticated reader. Auden or Villon, Henry James or James Joyce, if the guy has talent his books are on our shelves'.

Here is another example of the same bookseller's advertisements:

'For a few months last year, "everyone" was reading Fitzgerald. And then they were reading James. And then Kafka. And then Kierkegaard and the Existentialists. While James rode the crest of the wave, his books were to be found at the corner cigar-store, but if you read James before it was the thing to do—or want to read him now—this may be your shop'.

PR seems also to have more serious, if not more sophisticated readers than those appealed to in the advertisements, to judge from a spontaneous tribute in the same number. The writer, described in a previous number as a student at Columbia, deposes:

'How much this sense of freedom and radical temper in *PR* has meant to me cannot be over-stated, and I consider it a solemn occasion to be able to say as much. As we go into what promises to be at any rate a grim if not catastrophic period, the preservation of an American intellectual community is the highest goal, perhaps, that a magazine can set itself. I don't see how community can be preserved on any level than that set by *PR*. Our universities are not intellectual communities in any real sense. They are groups of virtuosi gathered together largely for self-protection, giving their relatively meaningless solo performances according to certain comfortable conventions . . . Our small college *Reviews* occasionally run *PR* a close second, but one wonders what might happen if they lacked the example of radical independent *Reviews*. The pretence of editorial impartiality is no more successful on the level of the *Reviews* than on the *Time-Life* level. The Luce papers are partial to all kinds of nationalist arrogance, moral stupidity, and pea-green sophomoric wit; *PR* is partial to vitality, elegance, honesty, etc., etc.—there's the difference, and there is no conceivable compromise. No art or craft can afford a democracy of standards—only a democracy of technical means. Perhaps this is all gross platitude, but it is something I wanted to say'.

The considerations raised in this letter would serve, if nothing else, to direct attention to the fundamental similarity of the plight of the intellectual in the U.S.A. and in England. Mr. Wolfert described his intellectuals as an 'élite proletariat'. Without wishing to make too much of the analogy, there does seem to be ground for desiderating among these proletarian groups, if not world-wide, at least civilization-wide unity. *PR* already has its contacts with Europe and within Europe with England through Mr. Koestler's 'London Letter'. Now that a 'British' edition is available we have every reason to welcome a review which, besides keeping us informed about intellectual life in the U.S.A., in the state of abnormal poverty from which we suffer as regards literary journals, sets a standard well above the *Horizon* level.

H.A.M.

BACKGROUND AND DOCTRINE

FIVE POEMS 1470-1870, An Elementary Essay on the Background of English Literature, by E. M. W. Tillyard (Chatto and Windus, 8/6).

ESSAYS ON LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE ENGLISH TRADITION, by S. L. Bethell (Dennis Dobson, 6/-).

Both these books are written for the general reader rather than the specialist. The Master of Jesus is concerned primarily with intellectual climate, and offers his work as a new approach to literary history. Mr. Bethell, acknowledging a debt to the criticism of *Scrutiny*, sets out to correct its aberrations and to show the need for the critic to appeal to explicit theological principles.

Dr. Tillyard calls his book 'an elementary essay', but it is not quite so unpretentious as it sounds. His general statement of aims is admirable: as 'an experimental attempt to present some of the contents of histories of literature in an abbreviated form' it is proposed to deal with 'a few pregnant instances, in the hope that general notions may tell more strongly when reached through the particular, and that the changes of temper or doctrine observable from one instance to another may suggest a continuous development. There is warrant for this method in Santayana's *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*'. (There is, certainly, and also in a good deal of criticism since: was it necessary to look back so far?) The method is: first, to explain difficulties and correct misleading interpretations, then to speak of the literary value of the poems, 'for it is first (and perhaps only) through that value that the reader naturally desires to know something of the ideas they take for granted or strive to express', and finally to expound the ideas themselves. This seems a reasonable approach, though it suggests somewhat too categorical a division and does not emphasize