

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

sufficiently that the 'ideas' only become alive and intelligible, are in fact only effectively there at all, in so far as they are essentially embodied in the poetry. But it is the application of these principles that matters. In the first place the choice of poems seems, if not arbitrary and eccentric, at least to have more regard to their representative character than to their intrinsic value. They are Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, Davies's *Orchestra*, Dryden's *Ode on Anne Killigrew*, Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and Swinburne's *Hertha*. The Henryson and the Coleridge may pass as satisfying both conditions; the Davies and the Dryden seem to me only moderately interesting in themselves, and the Swinburne a crude and boring piece of rhetoric.

Even where one agrees with Dr. Tillyard's estimate, however, his critical analysis is sometimes dubious and ineffectual. He tends to use terms like 'rhetoric' and 'structure', 'form' and 'content' as if they referred to separable and measurable constituents, and when he turns to the discussion of less ponderable matters like rhythm and imagery he is often unconvincing. In stanza 14 of the *Testament*, for example, do the words

Richt priveilie, but fellowschip, on fute,
Disagysit,

really recall in any significant way Milton's

Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves?

And surely there is some exaggeration in the following comment on the admittedly effective line

Under smyling scho was dissimulait :

'The rhythm of the first two words is bolstered up, suggesting the carefully maintained façade: in the last three words the rhythm collapses and disperses, suggesting both the secretiveness of a whisper and the shifts and eddies behind the façade'. Or again on stanza 106 of *Orchestra* Dr. Tillyard comments 'The very iteration of *Love* is like the beat of a young, full-blooded pulse', but is the effect really more than that of a conventional repetition which could be paralleled in at least a score of other Elizabethan poems? Or take his justification of the image of the sea's 'great crystal eye' in stanza 49 as 'more than fancy': 'The shape of both is curved; both offer surfaces for reflected light; both have their little-known and important depths beneath those surfaces'. One is tempted to add 'and there is salmons in both', but the point is that these ingenious comparisons are not operative in a normal reading of the line and the image remains a fairly superficial conceit. There follows a little dig at the Metaphysicals, but a Metaphysical would hardly have made the sea an eye in one line and the possessor of the eye three lines later.

Dr. Tillyard is inclined to hedge over his judgments of comparative value. He says 'I do not mean to imply that *Orchestra* is a great poem. In intensity of feeling it falls short of the *Testament of Cresseid* and is closer to the third poem, Dryden's *Ode on Mrs. Killigrew*'. Later we are told 'Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* is a beautiful and moving poem of one good minor poet; Davies's *Orchestra* is a beautiful and exhilarating poem of another. Dryden's *Ode on Anne Killigrew* is a masterpiece of a major poet. We need not like it best, but if we do compare, it makes the other two look a little amateurish'. This rather exaggerated praise of the *Ode* continues in terms of 'the wealth of imaginative invention' and 'the glory of the verbal music': we hear of the controlled yet enthusiastic movement', 'the masterly formal and logical shape', and so on, but in the end we are hardly persuaded that the poem is equal in complexity or profundity to the *Elegy on an Unfortunate Lady* (to take an example which will leave no excuse for suspecting a dislike of Augustan decorum). The analysis of *The Ancient Mariner* is on the whole more convincing, with a good note on the anticipatory relaxation of rhythm in 'The moving moon went up the sky', some twenty lines before the turning-point of the Mariner's punishment when he blesses the water-snakes unaware. One cannot say the same of the praise of *Hertha*—'eminent for the energy' of metrical movement and the fecundity of rhyme. These together express a fine mental exuberance and confidence'. Do they also, one might ask, in W. S. Gilbert? Swinburne's rhythms are hardly subtler. *Hertha*, we are told, 'is poetry that has the simple function of rousing the blood: and as such it is not to be despised'. But for such simple functions there are 'brisker pipes than poetry' and anyway Swinburne himself can be far livelier than here. Dr. Tillyard finally classes *Hertha* with Santayana's 'poetry of barbarism', but he persists in offering it as 'a splendid poem'.

I have dwelt particularly on the critical sections because Dr. Tillyard professes to put criticism first and it seems to me that he has not lived up to his professions. He appears, in fact, to be perpetuating the errors of the histories of literature in confusing historical with intrinsic significance. It is easy to see how for the literary historian a poem's suitability as an illustration of current ideas can become a substitute for genuine poetic value: similarly a preoccupation with the background of thought on the part of the student may easily take the place of a sensitive response to the work itself. No sensible person will wish to deny the need for some knowledge of a poem's cultural and historical setting, but sensitivity to literary value comes first, and by this one does not mean what the blurb in a revealing phrase calls 'the technical point of view of pure literary criticism'. After all, the cultural and historical background was not exactly ignored in such books as *The Sacred Wood* and *Revaluation*, and a good many articles in this journal have shown how criticism necessarily leads on to other considerations not limited to ideas and *intellectual* assumptions.

In the sections dealing more directly with 'mental climate'

Dr. Tillyard seems more at home and the result is a series of notes in the manner of his *Elizabethan World Picture*: the chapters on Henryson and Davies naturally cover some of the same ground. The Dryden chapter has a few useful comments on decorum and the Restoration world picture, but doubts are raised when we are invited to see the 'heroic principle' in Mirabel and Millamant, 'great characters sharply distinguished from the smaller folk that surround them'. The accounts of *The Ancient Mariner* and *Hertha* bring out some relevant trends of contemporary thought, though the classification of different attitudes becomes at times rather pedantic and laboured. From all of these sections a student might derive profitable knowledge and it is perhaps unfair to complain that rather too much fuss is made about comparatively obvious matters. If, however, the reader in mind really needs this kind of commentary, is he at a stage to be bothered with poems like *Orchestra* and the *Killigrew* ode, let alone *Hertha*? He can only feel the significance of the cultural assumptions of the past as something more than dead 'systems of ideas' if he first meets them functioning vitally in works of art that are unquestionably alive for us to-day.

The five parallel illustrations from the visual arts are open to much the same objections as some of the poems, namely that they are not in themselves sufficiently interesting. The resemblance of the *Troy Book* illumination to the *Testament* in serenity seems very slight, and a friend has suggested to me that the Grinling Gibbons chimney-piece might go more appropriately with Thomson's *Seasons*.

Mr. Bethell's book is a collection of essays from *The New English Weekly*, but that seems hardly to account for so pontifical a style, which at times also parodies itself: 'On the twenty-third Sunday after Trinity, being the eve of Powder Plot Day, Mr. Charles Morgan read himself in as critic to the *Sunday Times* . . . ' or his hearty assertions of ignorance ('I have never yet brought myself to read Flaubert'). His main theme is the necessity for literary criticism to be completed by explicit theological beliefs, and he is no more convincing here than in *The Literary Outlook*. Since he is engaged on several fronts simultaneously and argues throughout at a rather elementary level, it is difficult to follow all the turns of his thought. His most plausible point seems to be that since all criticism will show the influence of the critic's personal beliefs it is better for these to be explicit rather than unconscious. But surely this amounts to little more than the platitude that it is as well for the critic to be clear in his own mind about his beliefs? He is not bound to obtrude them in his work, nor is he absolved from conscious effort towards critical disinterestedness. However impossible it may be theoretically to see the work of art 'in itself', two critics can reach a considerable measure of agreement as to what lies in front of them before ultimate philosophical differences come into the question at all. Perhaps the real point at issue between Mr. Bethell and the *Scrutiny* critics to whom he so frequently refers is that (like the Marxists) he rejects the possibility of that working

measure of agreement about values which is implied in a living tradition, that cultural continuity which Dr. Leavis¹ has called preserving for the race 'the ability to draw on its most significant experience'. In the article from which this phrase is taken the critical discipline is defined in terms of 'a trained and cultivated ability to be relevant'. Mr. Bethell himself asserts that the duty of the critic is to find out what is 'really there, perhaps well below the surface'. But in practice the expositors of overt beliefs, whether Marxist or Anglican, are not at all notable for stricter relevance or a greater ability to guard against distortion by 'personal predilections or the assumptions of [their] own social group' (p. 13). Does Mr. Bethell really think that it is anti-religious prejudice which refuses to countenance his estimate of Charlotte Yonge or his coupling of Mr. Nicholson's *Five Rivers* with Mr. Eliot's *Little Gidding*? Is it not, in fact, rather arrogant of him to assume that all Christians would share his views?

His critical practice is an extraordinary mixture. He shows some grasp of what he sometimes misleadingly calls 'textual' criticism and can deal adequately with a passage of *Macbeth*: in the chapter on Levels of Abstraction he says one or two sensible things about the eighteenth century and its relatively mechanical view of composition. One or two of his incidental criticisms of *Scrutiny* are fair comment and at least deserve consideration. But for the most part the later sections of the book are simply an ingenious attempt to re-establish a safe academic eclecticism ('catholicity') of taste. The chapter on narrative, starting from the commonplace that the method of fiction is cumulative and that a novel can afford to carry dull passages, proceeds to the extreme position that a novelist's style is more or less irrelevant: 'the prose may remain over-abstract and perhaps clumsy, yet there may be great penetration in the treatment of character, incident and thought . . . Most novelists, I suppose, are merely undistinguished in style . . . it is essentially the style in common literary use that they employ. Smollett, Scott, Trollope, would all come under this head; so would Charlotte M. Yonge'. So, one might add, would *not* Jane Austen, Emily Brönte, George Eliot, Henry James and Conrad, to extend the list no further. One is grateful for so bald a statement of the assumptions behind most academic criticism of fiction. 'The consideration of plot, character and thought' is the critic's main task, but, Mr. Bethell concludes 'I need discuss it no further, since critical methods at that level are well known and their results generally appreciated'.

The chapter on Two Streams from Helicon is an irritating muddle of misconceptions and half-truths. The streams are: Group A, Donne, Shakespeare, Hopkins, etc., Group B, Spenser, Milton, Tennyson, etc. *Scrutiny* critics want all poetry to be like Group A and praise Group B poets only for incidental A qualities.

¹In a relevant note on *Literary Criticism and Politics* published in *Politics and Letters*, December, 1947.

So gross an over-simplification would be hardly worth discussing if it were not unfortunately a common misunderstanding. To answer the argument point by point would be tedious, but it seems appropriate to make one or two general statements. (1) The assertion that the language of poetry must bear a significant relation to contemporary speech does not mean that it must always be merely colloquial or that one is committed to any simple Wordsworthian doctrine. At the same time a stylized diction must have cultural sanctions and cannot be taken over as a mere convention by a new age: 'every development of language is a development of feeling as well'. (2) There is no virtue in either regularity or irregularity of rhythm in itself: the point is that it should be functional and expressive. Leaving Shakespeare and Donne out of the question, consider the comments in *Revaluation* on the Mulciber and Enna passages of *Paradise Lost*, on *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, on the *Ode to Autumn*, and in a recent *Scrutiny* on *Westminster Bridge*.² (3) Similar considerations apply to imagery: to ask that it shall be functional rather than merely decorative, concrete and immediate rather than vaguely pictorial and glamorous, is by no means to demand that all poetry should be Metaphysical. Keats or Wordsworth will again supply sufficient contrast to Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites. (4) The question of a supposed preference for sophistication and wit (related to nineteen-twenty-ish fashions) goes back not only to Mr. Eliot's essay on Marvell ('a recognition, implicit in every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible') but also to the remark in *Principles of Literary Criticism* that irony is a constant character of the greatest poetry. Mr. Bethell might ponder the fact that of Dr. Richards's five examples two only were Metaphysical, the others being *The Ode to A Nightingale*, *Proud Maisie* and *Sir Patrick Spens*.

As for his attempt to argue that *Tears, idle tears* is superior to *Piano*, it is not convincing; but in its context this comparison was preceded by two others (*Proud Maisie* with *Heracitus*, and *A slumber did my spirit seal* with *Break, break, break*) which make a similar point in a way even more difficult to refute. Behind all this, of course, lie the hoary old academic prejudices in favour of nineteenth-century romanticism, clothed in the faint aura of theological orthodoxy thrown over them recently by Dr. C. S. Lewis, with his customary ingenuity. Perhaps one should invoke Dante and Mr. Eliot's distinction between the high and the low dream.³ After all this it is not surprising to find Mr. Bethell concluding with a highly respectable note on the English tradition ('sentimental, romantic, rural') which parades all the right names. We may yet see him, too, 'reading himself in' for one of the Sunday papers on the eve of some future Powder Plot Day.

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²F. R. Leavis: *Imagery and Movement*, Vol. XIII, p. 127.

³T. S. Eliot: *Selected Essays*, p. 248.

REASON AND UNREASON IN SOCIETY: Ginsberg (Longmans, 15/-).

This is a book of considerable importance; and the off-hand way in which it has been received by sections of the press is a matter for some disquiet. It is not difficult to see reasons for its indifferent reception. Neither in style nor subject-matter does Professor Ginsberg pander to the W.E.A.-Pelican level of public discussion; and those who, attracted by its title, go to the book for a rehash of current theories of the irrational, with titillating examples, will be repulsed by an austerity of material and treatment.

Professor Ginsberg is the direct heir to the Hobhouse tradition of sociological thought (he 'knows my mind as well as I know it myself', wrote Hobhouse on one occasion), and he was for many years associated with the first holder of the Martin White professorship, a chair he now occupies himself. Certain features of Hobhouse's system of ideas he accepts as presuppositions to his own approach. Hobhouse asserted a rationalism which sought to extend its sway over the unconscious elements of the mind and which, while it could never become co-extensive with mind, yet accepted such an extension as the ideal to be sought; as he expressed it, 'the weakness or defect of reason is equally the weakness or defect of the non-rational elements. Its extension to them, their inclusion within its sphere, is their redemption'. Hobhouse believed that such an extension of the powers of reason had taken place that man had reached a stage where self-directed development was possible; for to him progress was not automatic, but depended on human will and thought. In Hobhouse's system, too, there was to be a constant interconnection between sociology and social philosophy; there must be a constant 'experiential reconstruction', by which concepts might be referred back to the facts of experience and criticized in the light of a growing knowledge of the conditions determining the development of thought itself. Ultimate questions thus were subject to rational examination—there was to be an interweaving of the mechanical and the teleological. 'Thus the belief in the reality of progress rests ultimately on the rationality of mind, on the possibility of forming an intelligible conception of a good common to humanity, and of securing an effective will directed to this good'.

This brief and by no means full account of Hobhouse's contribution to philosophy and sociology, taken, as it is, largely from Professor Ginsberg's analysis, can be paralleled in the explicit or implicit assumptions of Ginsberg's own positive outlook. What gives his work its peculiar importance at the moment lies in its realization of the need for a connection between social science and social philosophy. 'The problems of deepest interest to laymen and student alike are just those in which questions of value and questions of fact are closely interwoven and to see them in their proper relationship is a matter of the most vital importance to the social inquirer' (p. 122). Professor Ginsberg combats the conclusions 'that moral