

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

L. H. MYERS AND THE CRITICAL FUNCTION: REBUKE AND REPLY.

TO THE EDITORS OF *Scrutiny*.

Dear Sirs,

The chief value of *Scrutiny*'s critical method is that judgments are based upon close examination of actual texts, and not upon established reputation, whether that reputation has been established by *The Times Literary Supplement* or by *Scrutiny* itself. It is therefore disturbing to find that *Scrutiny* writers are some of them falling into the habit of delivering judgment on authors in batches, without even taking the trouble to specify their individual offences. To quote a sentence from Mr. H. A. Mason (*Measure for Measure: or Anglo-American Exchanges*, *Scrutiny* March 1949): 'To fail to be impressed by Auden, Spender, Dylan Thomas, *et hoc genus omne*, and to say so in public is described as "fouling the nest"'. Can Mr. Mason really think that Dylan Thomas is of the same *genus* as Auden? And if he does, are we not entitled to some illustration?

In the same number of *Scrutiny* Mr. R. C. Churchill writes: 'Apparently it has never occurred to [Dr. Joad] that some people preferred, and still prefer, and for cultural-spiritual reasons, James and Conrad and Yeats to their contemporaries (roughly speaking) Shaw and Wells and Bennett; and that such people stand a better chance of appreciating Joyce, Lawrence, Forster, Owen, Thomas, Rosenberg, Pound, Eliot, Woolf, Dawson, Powys, Myers, etc. . . .' Mr. Churchill neither specifies his 'cultural-spiritual reasons', nor gives any good reason for his grouping of Joyce and Lawrence with 'Dawson, Powys, Myers, etc.'.

To quote again from Mr. Mason: 'The foreigner does not spontaneously prefer, say, Graham Greene to L. H. Myers. He hears only of the former, and takes him as representative of the best the English can do in the "philosophical novelist's" line'. Here we see Mr. Mason contemptuously dismissing a writer by the simple process of mentioning him in the same breath with L. H. Myers, whom we are invited to accept, without qualification and without evidence, as a touchstone of literary virtue.

Since the name of L. H. Myers has been mentioned twice with reverence in one number of *Scrutiny*, it may be useful to examine a passage from this author, a passage picked out from the first of his novels to hand—his *Chio*, published by Penguin Books. Here is his description of a man on his deathbed taking a last farewell of his wife:

'He went on speaking, but with frequent lapses into silence. She could see that he was quite at his ease. Presently he threw

out: "Death saves one, you know, from a multitude of follies!" and his smile explained well enough what he meant.

"Marion", he said a little later, "I doubt whether you realise how much you have been in my thoughts during the twenty-odd years that I've known you. Your vitality, your courage, your never-failing charm . . ." His voice died away, but she just caught the words "an inborn gallantry of character".

'To this again she said nothing. He should never know that his tribute of praise fell upon a heart bitter with despair. Her courage! Good God! where was her courage now? Little did he realise that she was passing through a spiritual ordeal no less severe than his. For her the hour about to strike was the hour not of bereavement only but also of renunciation. She felt—and the persuasion this time was irresistible—that her Indian summer was drawing to a close. She might have told him that he was luckier than she; for whilst he was merely passing from waking into sleep, she was slipping from Life into Death-in-Life. She was entering the last stage of a woman's existence, when she has to live unsupported by the expectation, conscious or unconscious, of a love affair.'

The whole context should be studied; but perhaps this quotation is enough to show what Myers is capable of. The equating of a woman's 'need' for erotic stimulus with the fact of an actual death is a sufficient comment on Myers' sensibility; his description of a conscious death as a 'passing from waking into sleep', together with such phrases as "'Your vitality, your courage, your never-failing charm . . ." . . . "an inborn gallantry of character". . . Her courage! Good God! where was her courage now? . . .'; these sufficiently reveal the quality of the writer's perceptions and feelings.

Can this passage, in other words, be safely quoted to a foreigner as the work of an author who is to be accepted as a standard of judgment (for that, after all, is what both Mr. Mason and Mr. Churchill clearly imply)? Is it not, on the contrary, cheap, slick, vulgar writing? It seems to us that *Scrutiny* writers are some of them in danger of resting complacently in their own past judgments, instead of continuing the strenuous task of close critical examination and revaluing, which has won them the honourable title of *scrutineers*. Could we not have more scrutiny and less casual, unsupported condemnation or reverence? Perhaps a 'Revaluation' of 'Powys, Myers, etc.' might next be undertaken. We have no doubt that Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, and Lawrence will stand any amount of critical re-examination; but we should not be offered dogmatic assertion in the place of critical illumination, and even the less significant authors have the right to a fair trial.

C. VAN HEYNINGEN.

G. H. DURRANT.

University of Natal,
Pietermaritzburg.

A journal that attempts to maintain the function of criticism must be permitted some reliance on its past work. The effective performance of the function is necessarily a long-term affair. It would hardly be possible to proceed at all if one were forbidden to assume any judgment or valuation without demonstrating it. Of course, there is always the danger of assuming too easily, of resting too much on past work, and of slipping into a licentious economy; and it is wholesome to be kept reminded of the danger by such challenges as the present.

To say this, however, is not to say that our correspondents' rebuke is wholly just. So far, indeed, as it relates to Mr. Mason's '*hoc genus omne*' we are not clear what their intention is. 'Can Mr. Mason', they ask, 'really think that Dylan Thomas is of the same *genus* as Auden?' The '*genus*'—Mr. Mason's intention seems to us plain enough—is of writers passing current as established major values whose reputations, unjustified by any creative achievement, are matters of mere fashion and of routine acceptance. To which of the two writers mentioned do our correspondents consider the bracketing to be unfair? The adverse criticism of Auden has been argued and illustrated in these pages more than half-a-dozen times by almost as many different reviewers (including Mr. Mason). Dylan Thomas, it is true, has not had as much attention. But a critique of him appeared as recently as Summer 1946 (Vol. XIV, No. 1), and a book on him—though, of course, our correspondents couldn't have foreseen this—was made the occasion for a critical repondering in our last issue (Vol. XVI, No. 3).

The inclusion of the two poets for the given purpose in the same '*genus*' seems to us critically just; grounds have been given, and we cannot see what our correspondents find to object to. Is it that historically Auden counts a great deal more, having been a major influence, and that he may reasonably be judged to have had a more impressive talent? But these considerations do not affect Mr. Mason's point, which is that, while both Auden and Thomas pass current internationally as established values, successors in the line of English poets, whatever their own differing magnitudes and kinds, of Mr. Eliot, neither of them, if creative achievement establishes a man a poet, has begun to make good the claims so universally endorsed. Neither exists in the same sky as Mr. Eliot for comparisons of magnitude and significance. Their reputations illustrate both the abeyance in our time of the critical function, and the power of the system that has succeeded in substituting its own solidarity-values (see Mr. John Hayward's British Council booklet, *Prose Literature since 1939*, commented on in *Scrutiny*, Vol. XV, No. 4, p. 313) for those which properly concern criticism.

The system, Mr. Mason was testifying in the passage about Graham Greene and L. H. Myers to which objection has been taken, controls British cultural relations with the Continent. Our correspondents, we gather, do not so much object to the dismissal

of Graham Greene (whom we have not yet dealt with in these pages—the difficulty has been to find a reviewer prepared to spend the necessary time on him) as to the acceptance of L. H. Myers—the assumption that a critic in *Scrutiny* has a right to refer to him without argument as a novelist who commands a high valuation. Where Myers is in question the Editors tend to rest on the consciousness that he has had close and extended critical attention in *Scrutiny*—that he had here, in fact, the first critique (we believe) that he ever received. Challenged, we have to confess that that was fifteen years ago (June 1934, Vol. III, No. 1). Still, his subsequent books were reviewed in these pages and, after all, since space is limited and there are always so many new things calling for notice, may we not reasonably plead our consciousness that there was D. W. Harding's original critique to refer back to?

It will be in place to do some quoting from it here. Commenting on the passage from *The Clio*, and underlining some phrases in it, our correspondents say: 'these sufficiently reveal the quality of the writer's perceptions and feelings'. Haven't we here, they ask, 'cheap, slick, vulgar writing'? But such conclusions cannot be safely drawn without the study of context they themselves prescribe, but do not actually seem to have made. To comment on the passages as they do is like criticizing James Joyce for the cheapness and vulgarity of Gertie MacDowell's soliloquies. As Harding observes, with illustrations, 'unfortunate prose' can be found which 'for many people must be a serious obstacle to the appreciation of his work's excellence'. But before he has observed this he has discussed both the nature of Myers' interests and aims, and the difference between *The Clio* and the other books.

'*The Clio* as a whole, in spite of the significance of this theme, lacks richness and importance. Its comparative failure is closely related to a difference in the treatment of character between this book and the others, the immediate sign of the difference being that you are invited to feel a little superior to the characters here whereas in the other novels you respect them'.

As for the theme:

'In all four of his novels L. H. Myers is concerned with the theme of individual development in a civilized society, a society in which leisure and a tradition of culture make possible the practised intelligence and sensibility which he takes to be necessary conditions of development, and in fact in *The Clio* he sees what can be said for this civilized background in the absence of any of the highly developed individuals whom he's really interested in'.

Sir James is 'the character who is dying in the passage that our correspondents quote. Of him Harding says:

'Sir James is not presented as anything other than a rather selfish man of small elegant life. The superficiality (in one sense)

of the civilization he stands for is stressed not only explicitly in the triviality of many of the characters but also by the recurrent contrast between it and the elementary impulses and physical facts below it. The death of Sir James is the most profound statement of the theme; but it also appears in his mild lechery just before his illness'.

Of *The Clio*, again, Harding says:

'In that book, although his theme is profound, underlying even the subtlest lives, Myers is attempting to present it in the lives of people who are not, as individuals, of any great interest. It is for this reason that one is made to feel aloof from the characters; it is only the total pattern that they contribute to which can make any claim on our interest. In this technical respect *The Clio* can be classed with, say, T. F. Powys's novels, although with its less richly specific presentation of the theme and its less bold and well-knit pattern it is far inferior to Powys's best work. This treatment of character is probably only possible when a novel's themes are the simple profundities'.

It should be plain, then, that, for all its inferiority (and it is in some ways a decidedly unpleasant book), *The Clio* need not be dismissed as cheap, and unworthy the sensitive reader's attention. Further, as Harding shows, it is, by the standard of what entitles Myers to the kind of respectful reference that our correspondents object to, inferior. Harding says:

'In his better work Myers is engrossed with the subtler problems which cannot exist except for those who are living finely, and which besides raising fundamental issues also make up the detailed texture of living; and these novels, instead of being an *expression* of problems and beliefs, are rather a means in themselves of defining the problems and clarifying the beliefs. With this change of aim goes a change in the use of character. The people represented now are of the kind who have an immediate personal relevance for you apart from the total pattern of the novel. The heroes are at least as subtle and as complex in interest and feelings as you, and the villains—even if you feel superior to them—are formidable'.

When in *Scrutiny* Myers is referred to as a writer of major interest in modern English fiction, it is above all *The Root and the Flower* that one has in mind. (This trilogy is now incorporated in the one-volume tetralogy, *The Near and the Far*, the last part of which, *The Pool of Vishnu*, hardly adds strength to the whole.) Perhaps it is well to add that to take Myers as a writer of major interest who repays the most serious kind of attention is not to claim for him the status of great novelist. Harding's concluding paragraph runs:

'The worth of Myers' work ought perhaps to be regarded as largely independent of one's opinion of the novels as works of

art, where judgments may differ widely; essentially they are means of communicating, and they would still be of remarkable value if you concluded that they were scientific essays of an unusual kind. Their first value lies in the fact that they do succeed—by whatever means—in conveying extremely clear and sensitive insight into the conditions of adult and self-responsible lives in a civilized society’.

Myers was enough of a novelist to justify the mode in which he chose to develop his themes and his interests; and if his novels do not repay the intense and sustained attention of the serious and educated, then what fiction produced in English since the death of Lawrence does?

Our correspondents seem to object again to the attribution of distinguished status to T. F. Powys. And it is true that the high valuation has not, in *Scrutiny*, been backed by any critical study—though certain of those who were most concerned in founding *Scrutiny* had given close critical study to Powys in the days when his most important works were coming out. Critiques have been planned from time to time; but, owing to a series of accidents, have not actually appeared. We hope the omission will be repaired before long. Meanwhile it should surely be found not extravagant to assume a general agreement that *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* and *Fables* represent a remarkably original art that deserves serious critical appraisal. Bro. George Every, in a book reviewed elsewhere in this issue, appears to endorse his Mr. Norman Nicholson's bracketing of Powys with Joyce as 'blasphemous and bawdy'. Actually, Powys's treatment of human life is as fundamentally serious and religious as Bunyan's (the mention of whom perhaps sufficiently affects the dissociation from Joyce); and to see Powys as 'bawdy' is to betray an extreme moral obtuseness.

F.R.L.

POETRY PRIZES FOR THE FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN, 1951.

Under the above head, we have received (O.H.M.S.) from the Chief Press Officer of the Festival the information that the Arts Council of Great Britain, in connexion with the Festival of Britain, 1951, will offer Poetry Prizes, to the value of £1,100. The following Panel of Judges has been appointed: Sir Kenneth Clark (*Chairman*), Professor C. M. Bowra, Lord David Cecil, Mr. John Hayward, Mr. George Rylands, Mr. Basil Willey.

No doubt this Panel will do as well as any that one can conceive of as being found eligible, by the people who decide these things (who are they?), for such a responsibility. Nevertheless, the qualifications of these appointed national judges seem peculiarly worthy of notice.

The Chairman, Sir Kenneth Clark, has never been known as a critic of poetry, or literature—except that he wrote in *Horizon*

an appreciation (in the vulgar sense) of Dr. Edith Sitwell as great poet.

Professor Bowra has written a separately published essay (again 'appreciative') of Dr. Sitwell's verse. He wrote a book on 'Symbolism' in poetry in which his main term remained so undefined, and was applied so variously, as to be of little use as a critical instrument. His reputation is based on his ability to write as a critical authority on the poetry of other languages, including Russian. He has given no evidence of any powers as a critic of English poetry.

Lord David Cecil made his *début* as a biographer. He has written a book on Hardy's novels that has been dealt with in these pages (Vol. XI, No. 3). He has also written about other novelists. What grounds, one wonders (other than his having succeeded to a Chair of Poetry at Oxford), would his warmest admirers urge to establish a presumption of his fitness to judge of poetry—and of contemporary poetry?

Mr. John Hayward is known as a specialist scholar who has done some editing. He wrote the British Council booklet referred to above, *Prose Literature since 1939*, in which, to quote our own comment, he presented the 'currency-values of Metropolitan literary society and the associated University *milieux* as the distinctions and achievements of contemporary England'.

Mr. George Rylands is known as an actor-producer of Elizabethan drama.

Of Mr. Basil Willey it can at least be said that he holds a Chair of English Literature. But it must be at once added that the books on which his reputation rests are remote from literary criticism, and offer no grounds at all for attributing to the writer any practice in the judgment of poetry.

It seems to us eloquent of the state of affairs that has been discussed here that the Arts Council of Great Britain, undertaking to use for the encouragement of poetry in this country the resources at its disposal, should have been able without bracing itself for a storm of protest or ridicule to invest with supreme critical authority a Panel so composed. It seems to us that, given for fellow-members any five of this Panel, no critic truly qualified would have consented to serve on it. And it seems to us that, even if by chance the distribution of the prizes should be such as to tend to the encouragement of such genuine creative gifts as may be found among the competitors, more harm than good will have been done to the cause of English poetry, which is inseparable from the cause of English criticism.

But, it will be asked, what other kinds of appointment could those responsible have made? They had to find persons of some formal standing whose names were known. Things being as they are to-day, what Panel both acceptable and truly qualified could one have chosen for them? And would things have been so much better in the time of Edmund Gosse? In fact, hasn't one to go back to the time of Leslie Stephen to find an England in which