

THE OBSCURITY OF MODERN POETRY

To assert that modern verse is needlessly obscure is not to range oneself alongside those who regard Kipling and Mr. Masefield as the standard by which their successors should infallibly be judged. Nor is it to be in the position of the dear old don who, in the early 'thirties, interviewed me for a scholarship, which I did not obtain, at one of the Oxford colleges.

Your answers have so far been fairly satisfactory,' he said, 'but have you read any *modern* poetry?'

The name Eliot' was trembling on my lips, and would have been uttered had he not bereft me temporarily of speech by adding: 'Tennyson or Swinburne, for example?'

To come nearer home, I do not share myself the contempt for the poetry of the 'Georgians' that is so fashionable to-day. Gibson, Brooke, Abercrombie, Drinkwater, de la Mare, Blunden, Davies and the rest wrote excellent simple verse on simple subjects. The poets of the 'thirties, and even more the poets writing since the war, keep to simple subjects, often extremely naïve subjects, but wrap them up in a modern, fashionable 'poetic diction' which they claim to have been invented by Hopkins, Yeats, Pound, Eliot and Joyce. This claim needs looking into.

The Marxist poets in Britain fell, of course, between two stools. They tried to equate an ingenuous code of politics with the expression in verse of the complexities of the modern world. Their needless obscurity was intended to cover up the confusions they inevitably ran into. They styled themselves the followers of Eliot, until the elder poet (in the comic words of John Strachey) 'encouraged no doubt by the 1922-9 period of capitalist recovery, left the despair of the *Waste Land* behind him and took up the position of a highly intellectual reactionary.' Thenceforward, Mr. Eliot was a 'pedant,' to borrow a diatribe from Louis MacNeice.

But the Marxist poets differed from Eliot in every conceivable way—from the poetic as much as the political point of view. Eliot, of course, was supposed by the popular press to have been the main influence on the unfortunate obscurity of his successors. But Eliot is only complex when he has a complicated subject to deal with, such as *The Waste Land*; the Marxist poets are fatally obscure whatever the simplicity of their theme may be.

Take *Gerontion*, one of the finest poems of the early Eliot. Here the poet is straightforward:

Think at last

We have not reached conclusion, when I
 Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last
 I have not made this show purposelessly
 And it is not by any concitation
 Of the backward devils.
 I would meet you upon this honestly.
 I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
 To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
 I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
 Since what is kept must be adulterated?

—straightforward in that the poet has, by his intensely *dramatic* verse, carried the reader along with him, and set up, by intensity and concentration, not only a picture of the 'old man in a draughty house Under a windy knob' but an image of loneliness that touches the reader as the storm-scene in *Lear* touches him. The poet only attains the complexity that has so tempted the later poetasters when he wants to express the whirling thoughts in the mind of the old man himself:

De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled
 Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear
 In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the windy straits
 Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn,
 White feathers in the snow . . .

—an expression that is an extremely *dramatic* device.

The dramatic virtues that are Eliot's chief contribution to modern poetry and that separate him most forcibly from the sweet musings of the Georgians are conspicuous by their absence in Auden and Comrades. There has never been before in English poetry such undramatic verse as that written by our tame Marxists, such verse that gains so little when read aloud. Their virtues, of course, are a pleasing sincerity, but they speak for themselves and their little *clique*, as is evident by their use of private jokes and private clichés; they don't touch the heart of mankind (least of all the heart of the 'proletariat'!) as do Hopkins, Yeats, the best of the Georgians, Eliot and the early Pound. The best of the Marxists, Auden, is the most dull; his sincere purpose scorns the 'manufactured' images of Spender,

As clerks in whited banks
 With bird-claw pens column virgin paper
 To snow we added footprints . . .

or the versified equivalent of a Red orator in Hyde Park that is all that is offered by Day Lewis :

You above all who have come to the far end, victims
Of a run-down machine, who can bear it no longer ;
Whether in easy chairs chafing at impotence
Or against hunger, bullies and spies preserving
The nerve for action, the spark of indignation—
Need fight in the dark no more, you know your enemies.
You shall be leaders when zero hour is signalled,
Wielders of power and welders of a new world.

—an orange-box oratory, raising its voice to quell ' Fascist ' interruptions. Louis MacNeice is more sophisticated than this, but how dull is his catalogue of ' reality ' !

Old faces frosted with powder and choked in furs.
The jutlipped farmer gazing over the humpbacked wall.
The commercial traveller joking in the urinal . . .

It is hard to conceive how these essentially dull poets judge themselves to be influenced at all by the great poetry of Hopkins (always finest at his simplest), of Yeats or of Eliot. Unless, of course, they believe that imitation (without the ' apologies ' to be found in school magazines) is the sincerest form of flattery. The most blatant examples are Day Lewis's imitation of the *Wreck of the Deutschland* in *The Flight* :

Final a fall there for birds of passage, limed and lost
In shifty the sand's embrace . . .

and Auden's imitation of a number of Yeat's poems in the *Epilogue to The Orators* :

' O where are you going? ' said reader to rider . . .

—poems which are not simply exercises in verse, to keep their hands in, but which are offered seriously and are to be found in most anthologies of modern poetry. And for the countless imitations of Eliot, what Eliot himself said of Pope's imitators will be (substituting Eliot for Pope) a fitting comment :

' After Pope there was no one who thought and felt nearly enough like Pope to be able to use his language quite successfully ; but a good many second-rate writers tried to write something like it, unaware of the fact that the change of sensibility demanded a change of idiom . . . '

But the ' thirties (in spite of the efforts of Empson, Barker and Madge) were not nearly so ' complicated ' as the ' forties are to-day.

Scratching your head over a poem by Barker or Empson, you could, if you had time for such frivolity, piece together the poet's meaning as you solve a cross-word puzzle. With the Marxist proper, you could rely upon there being many 'slogans' interwoven with the 'terribly sophisticated verse.' So that you could get your bearings, and applaud when you saw the good old cliché, Blood Red Dawn, appearing yet once more on the page.

With the new poets, all that is changed. They have found a new author to imitate: the decadent Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*, so that this passage of Ross Nichols (though exceptionally stupid) is by no means unique:

Spewpan of throatbase
Wheezing lyre in the Neckwork
 whiff-whaff breathtunnel
(microbian wingtester)
trembling occasional adjusted, teethlips manoeuvred . . .

Imitations of Hopkins (who had done nothing to deserve them) now go hand in hand with imitations of the polyglot language of Joyce—for what purpose? Why, to add sophistication to a simple love-lyric. The Georgians, whatever their insufficiencies, didn't fall for this. And the greatest poets of our time, Yeats and Eliot, were too much masters of their craft to mistake sophistication for depth of feeling or obscurity for dramatic intensity.

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THE TRAGEDY OF JAMES JOYCE¹

MR. ELIOT's criticism of Joyce has been of two kinds; moral and technical. Moral, in such phrases as 'the most ethically orthodox of the more eminent men of my time' and 'an extremely serious and improving writer,' technical, as in the introductory note to the present selection, where the reader is told that 'Stuart Gilbert's *Ulysses* is the standard analysis of the structure of that work; and *An Exagmination of Work in Progress* . . . is a useful introduction to *Finnegan's Wake*.' In all cases a moral judgement in literary

¹ Introducing James Joyce. A selection of Joyce's prose with an introductory note by T. S. Eliot. Faber; 3s. 6d.