

Editorial: The Black Tom-Cat

In his little book on D.H. Lawrence Frank Kermode says that Lawrence's novels do not have a design on us. There are, to be sure, dogmas in them, the dogmas of Lawrence's treatises and letters; but, says Kermode, in the novels the ideas are made to submit to life. Lawrence himself said that the novel is the highest form of human experience precisely because the novel is 'so incapable of the absolute... in a novel there is always a tom-cat, a black tom-cat which pounces on the white dove of the Word'.

Iris Murdoch, philosopher and novelist, said this (in a novel): 'If a truth is complicated, you have to be an artist not to utter it as a lie'.

By contrast we have T.S. Eliot in his essay on Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca grumbling about what he takes to be the inability of a poet or dramatist to think. Shakespeare, for example, did not think in Hamlet. He merely used thought in the manner of Montaigne. One wonders if Eliot thought that the unadorned treatises of his acquaintance Bertrand Russell on such matters as marriage and war were better examples of thought than, say, *Anna Karenina* or *The Iliad*. Eliot may have been a purist about these things, but one suspects that the author of *Four Quartets* would really have taken Iris Murdoch's and Lawrence's part.

But philosophers may jibe at all of this. Does it mean that outside of formal stuff or certain pretty circumscribed questions, poetry (in the broad sense) is where we should look for complicated truth? Was Aristotle an artist in Iris Murdoch's sense, or Wittgenstein, two philosophers who may be said to have had a good sense of the complicatedness of truth? And is it true that in Lawrence's great novels and even in Iris Murdoch's there is not a degree of persuasion, even a design on the reader? There are certainly ideas, and at times the tom-cat seems less active than some might wish. They do not seem to have a pure Kantian disinterestedness, any more than does Dante—for Eliot the purest and greatest of the post classical poets. Is Lawrence less of a novelist because anyone who reads *The Rainbow* is unlikely to have her faith in progressive notions of education somewhat shaken?

Eliot says 'The poet makes poetry, the metaphysician makes metaphysics, the bee makes honey, the spider secretes a filament; you can hardly say that any of these agents believes: he merely does.' It won't do. The poet is often a metaphysician, and if we

think the metaphysician is too rarely an artist it is often because he is seduced away from life by the simplicity of reduction. The white dove of the Word cries out for the pounce of black tom-cat of experience.