

THE STATE OF ENGLISH LETTERS TO-DAY *

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Mr. Dean, members of the Faculty,

It is my first pleasure and duty in this, my opening lecture as Professor of English in this University, to say how great an honour it is to occupy this Chair which I now assume. It is, of course an inspiration to be associated with a University which, set in this capital city, founded by your great leader, Kemal Atatürk, must always be called upon to take its part in the development of this nation, at a time when achievement has been recently so rich, and potentiality is so massive. One can say to-day that whatever one does for Turkey, however small one's contribution may be, one does not only for Turkey but for the whole of the civilized world. In another and more personal sense it is an honour for me to be here. I follow Professor Gatenby whom you valued and loved so much. His work in English studies in this country will, I fancy, never be rivalled, and with that work it would be vain and impertinent in me to try to compete. But Professor Gatenby's example must always be present in the mind of the man who follows him.

I.

I take as my theme today the progress and change in English letters during the past quarter of a century, concluding with some observations on the mood and vision of English letters in the present day.

The War made changes in our national life, some of them touching the daily lives of the English people, the houses they live in, the food they eat, the work they do, and some of them, less palpable but none the less real, touching their mental and spiritual outlook, their evaluation of the world they live in and the demands it makes upon them.

Imaginative literature does not disclose these changes directly. It does not *tell* us about them ; it assumes and implies them. Katherine Mansfield, the New Zealand writer, discusses in her *Journal* the changes made in literature by the first World War. She writes : "The novel can't just leave the War out. There *must* have been a change of heart. It is fearful to see the 'settling' down of human beings. I feel in the profoundest sense that nothing

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can be the same. . . that, as artists we are traitors if we feel otherwise ; we have to take into account and find new expressions, new moulds, for our new thoughts and feelings". The War, she says, left "deserts of eternity" in the human spirit ; but she goes on, "I couldn't tell anyone bang out about those deserts". "Nothing can be the same" after the experience of war, but the artist cannot say "bang out" in what the change consists, or why the War has brought the change about.

II.

In English literature before the War, beneath all the affirmations of various faiths, Liberal, Christian, Marxist, or whatever they may have been, there was a profound sense of that chaos of nihilism, of disillusionment, of absurdity and irrationality, which must engulf the human spirit when faith of one kind or another is lost. A faith to think and act by is seen as an *alternative* to irrationality and ultimate negation ; but that human life might be irrational and absurd always remained as a dread possibility. And whatever faith the mind of the writer might subscribe to, his imagination was often possessed by the horror of this possibility.

What caused this state of mind it beyond the scope of this lecture and beyond my powers of analysis. But one aspect of it may be illustrated from literature. Psycho-analysis, as it seeped down in its broader implications into popular consciousness, had made us distrust conscious motives in human behaviour. The reasons we thought we had for acting as we do seemed very often to be merely excuses that we used to disguise from ourselves the deeper, often more squalid, motivations of our conduct. Besides, the new and too plausible interpretation of history, which stemmed from Marxism, suggested that what we thought to be the highest moral principles were often no more than rationalisations of conduct more materially and selfishly determined. Even literature did not really know what it was all about; for the writer was no more than the mouthpiece either of his own sub-conscious wishes and frustrations, or else of a blind movement in society in which men and classes were, often in spite of themselves, in pursuit of their own self-interest. Poets might suppose themselves to be writing about this or that ; but no, said the psycho-analyst, you are writing about something you do not recollect but which happened in early childhood ; or no, said the Marxist, you are writing to preserve the status quo.

It was inevitable that writers should try to cope with this mysterious world of motive which lay hidden beneath the consciousness. And even if they refused to believe all that they were told by the psycho-analysts and the Marxists, it was natural that they should suffer a good deal of unsettlement and uncertainty within these deep disturbances of thought and faith which were going on around them. There was, then, in those years

before the War, in the twenties and the thirties, a search for new forms in poetry, in the novel, and even for a new language (as in the work of James Joyce), in an attempt to express what had hitherto, so it was supposed, lain latent and undiscovered in human experience. Or, on the other hand, some poets felt a new need to attach themselves by conscious, even self-conscious, alignment to some social philosophy, in the fear (perhaps) that they might be giving unconscious support to a philosophy they would wish to reject. Moreover, it became almost an axiom in criticism that the writer did not know what he was writing about ; so that in Hamlet some critics suggested that Shakespeare was making a study of the Oedipus Complex, others that he was expressing the social forces from which the modern world of capitalism was being born and still others that he was composing, though obscurely, an allegory of the Christian faith.

III.

The sense of chaos and irrationality was explicit in the work of T. S. Eliot, even though it prompted him to seek order and reason in religious faith. It might be said, indeed, that in his earlier poems, his *imaginative* rendering of what is absurd and disorderly in modern life is much more concrete and potent than his rendering of the fulfilment of the spirit in Christian faith. His poem, *Burnt Norton*, written in 1935, ends with these two lines, descriptive of a vision of life without faith:

"Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after".

And in another passage he depicts this life as a "place of disaffection" :

"Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
That blows before and after time,
Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs
Time before and time after.

This is a "twittering world" in which we live, where the dim light is only a flicker over the "strained time-ridden faces". In another poem, time seems to him like a river, "with its cargo of dead negroes, cows, and chicken coops", carrying in its ebb every manner of river-waste, indifferently. The title of Eliot's first long poem, *The Waste Land*, is significant of life seen as without pattern, fostering all kinds of squalor and neurosis.

Eliot has a fragment of a play, called *Sweeney Agonistes*, in which he takes his characters from low gangster life, from "guys and molls", as Damon Runyon called them. It is a life in which utter futility finds feverish excitement in every kind of joyless debauchery and brutality ;

"We're gonna sit here and drink this booze
We're gonna sit here and have a tune

We're gonna stay and we're . gonna go
 And somebody's gotta pay the rent. .

I know who. .

That's nothing to me and nothing to you.

And it was the same sense of the immediacy and imminence of moral and spiritual chaos which made Graham Greene, one of the three most important modern English novelists, turn to this same underworld for the material of his early novels. His novel, *Brighton Rock*, is not only a study of the criminality of a young hooligan, it is also a picture of that world of brassy brutality, of cheap pleasure, of sensational cinema, and drunken gambling, from which the world of sordid crime is only just around the corner. Graham Greene looked at the human heart and found it harsh with unregenerate wickedness, the human spirit deformed and perverse. Evil is all the more positive for its association with familiar cinema posters, seaside-hotels, and penny amusements on the Brighton pier. And, what is worst, the most evil thing about evil is its absolute pointlessness, its affinity with the last desolation of absolute boredom.

Another novelist (like Graham Greene, also a Catholic) Evelyn Waugh, in the novels written before the War, implies a similar escape from boredom, although in a different sphere of social life, in his portraits of "bright young things" (some of them not so young) who seek in unrelenting vivacity to flee the demands of eternal life. To keep moving, that is the thing ; empty your glass and fill it again ; when the party is over, on to the next ; never let Time get the better of you-until there is no longer any cheating of Time. The opening chapters of his *Brideshead Revisited*, dealing with students at Oxford in the late nineteen twenties, admirably reports these attempts to find reality in mere appearance, to make of life an "existentialist" show.

IV.

Apart from T. S. Eliot, most young English poets looked to Left-wing politics to give point and purpose to their lives and their works. It is not unusual for poets, to whom a materialist philosophy would seem most repugnant, especially when they are young, to espouse such a philosophy as a clear-cut route away from confusion. Wordsworth and Shelley were both materialists when they were young. Nevertheless, once again one feels that with these pre-War Left-wing poets, their political views were not nearly so important to them, *imaginatively*, in their apprehension of the world, as their sense of the confusion and social *malaise* for which these views were thought to prescribe the remedy. W. H. Auden, the most talented of these poets, speaks for most of them in this stanza :

"The dogs are barking, the crops are growing,
 But nobody knows how the wind is blowing ;
 Gosh, to look at we're no great catch,
 History seems to have struck a bad patch".

There it is. History seems to have struck a bad patch. Nobody knows where the wind is blowing. Marxism, they thought, at least gives understandable directions. The years, we shall see, taught them differently.

V.

There is, of course, a Liberal Humanism, which says, Yes, Life may be irrational and absurd-who knows?-but, if it is so, all the more reason for men and women to be rational and humane. And there were writers in England before the War who held this civilized, if sceptical, philosophy. The greatest virtue was to be found in tolerance ; the worst offence in cruelty. Value, for men who thought in this way, lies chiefly in the graciousness and integrity of personal relationships. One such writer, perhaps the best-known of them, E. M. Forster, has recently said, a little extravagantly, "I would rather betray my country than my friend". Forster belonged to a group of writers and thinkers, who have come to be known as The Bloomsbury Group, which included Lord Keynes, the economist, Roger Fry, the art critic, and Virginia Woolf, the most notable modern English woman novelist. Forster alone of them remains, and he alone continues to represent this kind of Liberalism. He has recently published a book, *The Hill of Devi*, which tells of his friendship with a minor and eccentric Indian princeling, a strange personality made up of saintliness and silliness, incorrigibly and incorruptibly himself ; so much himself, indeed, that the world was in the end too much for him and he lost his throne and his principedom. It is a book which is permeated with this Liberal belief in the importance of personality ; this prince was no good to his people, and, as the world judges, little good to himself, but-and this is the important thing-he had the virtue and the dignity and the charm of a man who is nothing other than himself.

This kind of Liberalism has scarcely survived the War, except in the very rare writings of E. M. Forster. It is hard to give first place to the importance of personal relationships, perhaps, and to assert the values of tolerance and understanding, in an intolerant and divided world. The Liberal temper is a fair-weather flower, and it may need for its thriving a world-at peace and an assured income. And yet we must regret its decline, and we must agree that in this Bloomsbury Group-with Keynes, Roger Fry, Virginia Woolf, and E. M. Forster himself-the graces of life were better observed than they are in these days of greater difficulty and urgency.

VI.

The writers of the twenties and the thirties, however, were in general preoccupied with the political and social crisis of their times. The threat of War overshadowed their minds. Their imaginations moved in the realm of the struggle between economic classes, the facts of poverty and unemployment, the nature of and the need for social change. Left and Right Wing poets attached themselves to political parties, wrote books about politics, and sometimes made of their poetry no more than political polemic. The same is very often true of the drama, although not so much in England as in the United States of America. But during the War we began to notice a change. With the younger War poets—those who had not written much before the War, such as Alun Lewis and Roger Keyes, both of whom died—it is as though the War was too vast a horror for the poet to deal with, a thing like an earthquake or a great flood, outside the control and prediction of men, like a visitation. What, then, should the poet write about? These poets, like the Bloomsbury Group, turned to personal relationships, but in a very different setting. For the personal relationships they enjoyed were those forged in danger and discomfort. They cherished, to use Keats's phrase, the holiness of the heart's affections where these were most tested. In a world, made remote and unreal by blind disaster, these alone seemed present and real.

There is one poet and critic in England today, Sir Herbert Read, who continues to affirm the importance of personality-personality as distinct from personal relationships, and, perhaps "my" personality rather than personality in general—even to the point of being an avowed anarchist. He has his followers, some of whom have taken the name of "Personalists", calling their philosophy "Personalism". But these are rather thin voices in a strident world.

Some other writers, without proclaiming a philosophy of "personalism" have, nevertheless, retired in various ways to cultivate particular plots in their own gardens, seeming almost self-consciously to restrict their range. Some of them have gone in for translation—as good an occupation as any, when the creative impulse flags. So Louis MacNeice has done a translation of Goethe's *Faust*, G. Day Lewis one of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Rex Warner one of Thucydides. Certain novelists, such as Henry Green and Miss Compton Burnett, have devoted their talents to what is sometimes no more than *pastiche*, the production of the *tour de force*. Others, such as Stephen Spender, have turned to autobiography, looking to their past to find occupation for the present. All these writers seem now to be marking time, but there are other more positive voices.

VII.

Two new reputations have been firmly established in English literature since the War, those of the novelist, Joyce Cary, and the poetic dramatist, Christopher Fry. They were both writing before the War, but it is only since the War that they have been widely acclaimed as marking something like a Renaissance in their own fields. The reason for this seems to be that, whatever final judgement may be made on them in years to come, their writings are positive and vital ; they seek to affirm life.

Joyce Cary is in the main tradition of the English novel ; that is to say, he is interested and delighted by the extraordinary variety of human character and human behaviour. You go to his novels to meet people rather than to understand them ; good and bad, clever and stupid, lucky and unlucky, they quicken the affections as well as excite the (never intolerant) moral judgement. We see them rather as we saw Chaucer's pilgrims ; being themselves and seeking their own settlement with their universe in their own ways. Cary writes with tremendous gusto ; his invention seems inexhaustible ; and he always writes with love.

A useful comparison could be made of the young boy in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* and the other in Joyce Cary's *Charley is my Darling*. Both are juvenile delinquents, young criminals, if we like to call them so. But whereas Graham Greene's boy, in joyless squalor, reminds us of original wickedness and has no redeeming gift of happiness, Joyce Cary's Charley steals motor-cars, burgles houses, even burns them down, without malice or viciousness, but in an attempt to make life, *his* life, more radiant, more exciting than it is. In the eyes of the moralist and of the police he is a very bad boy ; and yet, in a very real sense of the word, he remains innocent. And he remains innocent, because, unlike the young criminals in *Brighton Rock*, he engages in evil only because he loves life. You may say that while Graham Greene sees the world as riddled with guilt, Joyce Cary is never forgetful of the paradox that in a world of so much cruelty and violence, there is so much innocence and love. Love of life may (as it does in Joyce Cary's novel, *Mister Johnson*) bring a man to the gallows ; but the strange thing is that in all this theft, and cheating, and murder, there is so little admixture of fundamental evil. And in this he is in one of the main streams of English writing—a stream which includes Chaucer and Fielding—in that of all kinds of wickedness the one he most abhors is *hypocrisy*.

Christopher Fry affirms life by restoring to the theatre the excitement of poetry, the intoxication of the word. Except in the prose plays of Bernard Shaw, in which dramatic argument, masterly rhetoric, and sparkling wit, are more important than plot or character, the English theatre had attached little emphasis to the delights of language. We had to go back, in fact, almost to Elizabethan times to find an exuberant enjoyment of the

spoken word, to find-in fact-life affirmed in language. This is what we find in Christopher Fry. Instead of hearing one character say to another of a glass of wine ;

"Pretty good, this, old man, don't you think ?", Christopher Fry gives us this ;

"How good it is,
How it sings to the throat, purling with summer.
It has a twin nature, winter and warmth in one,
Moon and meadow".

An American critic said of Christopher Fry's use of language in the theatre, that he could make it "dance and laugh and smile and sing". That is something in a world which is, on the whole, fairly drab.

VIII.

But the most important development in English letters in recent times has been the revival in them of the significance of religious faith. Many writers, some of them after strange pilgrimages of the spirit, have turned away from a materialist view of life and have declared their allegiance to a spiritual, often a Christian, interpretation of the universe. Two of our three most notable novelists, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, are Catholics, and, what is more, have become more and more pronounced in their use of the novel (and, with Graham Greene, the drama) as a specific means of giving expression to the Catholic view of life. W. H. Auden, before the War a Left-wing poet, after many adventures in many philosophies, has become a Christian. Christopher Isherwood, who has for so many years remained a novelist of brilliant promise," and Aldous Huxley, author of astringent satirical novels just after the First World War, have both accepted a spiritual interpretation of the universe after many years of study (and practice) of Indian ways of thought and life. Christopher Fry is a professing Anglican, and his most successful play, *The Sleep of Prisoners*, is a religious play and was first performed in a Church. To all these, Joyce Cary is something of an exception, for his faith is not declared; but his recent novels show a profound concern with the problem of religious belief.

And to the notion that life is irrational or absurd, the two living major poets in England, T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell, the one with deep intellectual conviction and the other with prophetic assurance and compassion, give in their recent poetry the answer of religious faith.

IX.

T. S. Eliot, as we have seen, began with a deep and often ironical sense of the absurdity and irrationality of life. Although his poem, *The Waste*

Land, has a religious conclusion, the main impression it makes is one of all that is waste and ridiculous in the Western World. But after this poem, each of Eliot's works seems to mark another stage in the settlement of his faith. There comes first a poem of "repentance" and "preparation", *Ash Wednesday*, which ends with these lines of humility and readiness:

"Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain,
 spirit of the garden,
 Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
 Teach us to care and not to care
 Teach us to sit stili
 Even among these rocks
 Our peace in His will
 And even among these rocks
 Sister, mother
 And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea
 Suffer me not to be separated
 And let my cry come unto thee.

Just after the war, in his long poem-sequence, *The Four Quartets*, Eliot produced one of the most impressive religious poems in the English language. It is impossible to say much of it here in detail; its kinship in construction and effect with music; its profound symbolism; its mixture of personal confession and philosophical reflection; its moving records of the moods of mystical experience and the glory of mystical illumination; its final affirmation. Woven into its themes are many strands; the contemplation of seventeenth century English religious recluses from the Little Gydding Community; accounts of mystical experience from St. John of the Cross; much from Dante; something from Indian philosophy, from the *Upanishads*. And yet the whole poem (rich as it is in history and tradition, and conscious as it is that faith is not merely something we discover for ourselves but our common, if often neglected, heritage) is the poetic exploration of experience in the search for reality, for that in time which has actuality out of time, for that certitude which (for Eliot) lies at the heart of mystery.

I will let Edith Sitwell speak for herself. This is how she begins one of her poems:

"I who was once a golden woman like those who walk
 in the dark heavens-but am now grown old
 And sit by the fire, and see the fire grow cold,
 Watch the dark fields for a rebirth of faith and wonder".

There is no English poet in whom the War quickened so much compassion, so profound a sense of the need of religious faith to sustain the tragedy.

There is something prophetic and sybilline in Edith Sitwell's latest utterances. A childless woman, she broods over the mysteries of sin and suffering in men, as though they were but children. She speaks like one who, now above the struggle, can in poetry take upon herself the agony of her fellow-men. She can in patience "watch the dark fields for a rebirth of faith and wonder". In this, perhaps-and with this I must conclude-we might think that, unless humanity is moving to final disaster, she utters the deep hope of our times.