THE LISTENER, 18 JANUARY, 1945. Vol. XXXIII. No. 836. PRICE THREEPENCE

The Listener

Published every Thursday by The British Broadcasting Corporation

Self-portrait by Goya, painted in the year of Waterloo

Art in a Distracted World. By Sir Kenneth Clark

The Listener

Published every Thursday by The British Broadcasting Corporation

Vol. XXXIII No. 836 Thursday 18 January, 1945 REGISTERED AT THE G.P.O. AS A NEWSPAPER

CONTENTS

The British Commonwealth and the World

By F. B. MALIM

WE are an odd people. I am astonished to find how much interest people in this country take in social security and how little in world security. We have had two world wars and yet the man-in-the-street still does not realise that without world peace none of the prospects held out to him by our most optimistic planners has any hope of realisation. We seem to be much more worried about how to distribute the products of industry than we are about the bigger job—the job which comes first: how to prevent the destruction of goods and the stoppage of industry by world wars.

For one hundred years, from 1815 to 1914, there was no world war, because the British Fleet controlled the ways of the sea. And, since behind that Fleet there was no great army threatening aggression, the world acquiesced in that supremacy, sometimes quite cheerfully. With the growth of other navies and the invention of the aeroplane, that dominance of the Royal Navy vanished—and it is not likely ever to return. And so the job of preventing world wars has become far more difficult. After the last war we determined to pin our faith on collective security. We joined in establishing the League of Nations. We reduced our Navy and Air Force by drastic cuts.

There is no need to tell you that as an instrument for maintaining peace the League of Nations was a failure. It was a league of sovereign nations, a consultative body—*it could not act without* the consent of the governments of those sovereign nations; and it had no force to execute a decision, even if it had been capable of reaching one. Today we are asked again to trust to collective security, but with a difference. It is suggested that we, with the United States and Russia, should jointly guarantee to maintain peace with—as Marshal Stalin has made clear—the necessary force for the restraint of aggressors. We are wiser—not so simple as twenty years ago, when so many people in this country believed that because our intentions were peaceful, the intentions of other governments must be so too. Marshal Stalin at least realises that it is foolish to think bad men will not continue to act as bad men, when they reckon they can do so safely.

I imagine everyone in this country wants this new form of collective security, based on force, to work. It is our plain duty to try to make it work, wholeheartedly and effectively. At the same time we must not overlook the possibility of failure. Now suppose we have got to act with others to prevent war, or suppose we are acting independently if circumstances compel us to act alone—

Poetry in War Time: I—The Older Poets

The first of two articles by HENRY REED

'Our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe'.

THESE words, spoken to the poet by the apparition of a long-dead master, occur in the last of Mr. T. S. Eliot's *Quartets*. They are a convenient point from which to start a brief examination of what poets have been doing during the last five years: they remind us that we judge a poet by his powers of speech, and they have an echo which carries us back to Mallarmé, one of the first great masters of the Symbolist tradition. In this tradition Mr. Eliot has always written; it is also the tradition of many of his greatest contemporaries. The trends of a literature are not easy to observe while they are still weaving their way around us (and it is usually necessary to judge younger poets in isolation); nor is literature so single a current as it once was. But it is fairly clear that in England and France, for more than sixty years, two currents, Symbolism and Naturalism, have existed side by side, and have dominated the literature of the two countries. From time to time they yield to each other, modulate into each other and, even in a single writer, borrow each other's virtues. Some works, such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, are compounded fairly equally of both. But they are never to be mistaken for each other, and they form a dualism in the minds of so many writers today that it is as well to remember them at the outset.

Symbolism in Poetry

In considering poetry, it is mainly Symbolism and not Naturalism which will concern us. What happens in a Symbolist poem is this: the emotions which a poet feels—and which are doubtless imprecise to begin with—converge upon some object, personification or landscape which crystallises them and renders them more definitely apprehensible and communicable, establishing for his thoughts and feelings a kind of tonality, a point of reference. From this point, his symbol or symbols, the poet's emotions radiate outwards again, free yet disciplined, not simply in narrative or meditation, but in a development which may partake of both. A perfect example is Mallarmé's 'L'Après-midi d'un Faune'. In this wonderful eclogue the faun is a symbol for sensuality. He is half-animal, half-man, and he has a luxurious imagination. The vague, drowsy sensations, thoughts and images in the poet's mind centre upon him and are canalised through his cogitations about the two nymphs he has just dreamt about. Other such poems—they are great landmarks in Symbolist poetry—are Valéry's 'La Jeune Parque' and 'Le Cimetière Marin'. The central images of such poems provide at once a release and a *pied-à-terre*. In French Symbolist poems there is more fluctuation and ambiguity than in English. In English, Eliot, for example, inherits some of the comparative stability of the Tennyson of 'Ulysses' and 'Tithonus'. Nevertheless fluctuation and ambiguity are, in a desirable sense, there, just as they are in those novels in which symbolism plays a part: in novels as distant from each other as *Moby Dick, Howards End* and *Between the Acts*. And there is this to be remembered of symbolism: a symbol has a life of its own, and Mallarmé's faun *is* a faun, all the time.

The two poets who have made the greatest contribution to poetry in the last five years have written in a symbolic mode; not a mode suddenly chosen, but something worked in for a long time. In his longer poems Mr. Eliot has always been a Symbolist, both in design and in detail; amplification of Symbolism as a means of expression has always gone alongside his great achievements in language. Miss Edith Sitwell, also a highly-conscious artist and technician, has come to Symbolism later and more gradually; but it is the strong vein of Symbolism in her two latest volumes, *Street Songs* and *Green Song*, that gives them their remarkable expansiveness. Her poetry is more rhapsodic and sibylline, and less architectural than Mr. Eliot's. But symbols hold her single poems and her poetry as a whole together: she has a series of Great Names—ideas and objects which people her poetry and constitute a sort of mythology—which continually recur; they have some of the character of the Wagnerian *leit-motiv*.

Mr. Eliot's use of symbolism is different. The *Quartets* have each a unifying major symbol: 'Burnt Norton', 'East Coker', 'The Dry Salvages' and 'Little Gidding' evolve from images respectively of air, earth, water and fire. As a further symbol, partly derived from, and reinforcing, these images, there is in each poem a symbolic locality, chosen as a more tangible point of stabilisation and departure. Is one in danger of suggesting that this subtle and beautiful work is composed of layers coolly placed on top of one another? It is not so, of course; it is part of the miraculous integrity of these poems—as of 'Hamlet'—that no amount of analysis (or of over-interpretation) can diminish one's excitement at seeing what is happening in them or deprive one of the sense of what moments of enlightenment their discoveries must have meant to their author. Under their large architectonic they deal with eternal truths, eternally difficult to communicate; indeed the difficulties of communicating apprehensions and illuminations suddenly 'given' in moments of special blessedness, or attained through years of observant waiting, are one of the themes of the *Quartets*, counter-pointing with the other themes. *Music:* one uses its terminology incessantly; and music—not its melody, but its design and its habits of repetition—has, since 'Ash Wednesday', been a model for Eliot; and some of his symbols develop and combine and become transfigured like musical 'subjects': the river, the sea, the headland and the bell in 'The Dry Salvages'; the various fires which flame and blaze through 'Little Gidding'; the rose, which is the first image to kindle the dry sticks of statement with which 'Burnt Norton' opens, and which appears in different guises throughout the poems before taking its place as a symbol for the natural life in 'Little Gidding'. This is poetry to which the word 'symphonic' may be literally applied.

The Dialect of the Tribe

What exactly Mallarmé meant by his phrase '*Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*' does not concern us here: English poets have rarely aimed at writing poetry of the kind of purity which Mallarmé aimed at. To purify the *dialect* of the tribe is a different task; and Eliot's work is notable for its precision and liberation of diction: precision because he never uses words carelessly, liberation because one has the feeling that from his poetry no word need be *tabu*, either on account of reconditeness or of excessive previous use. And it is impossible to talk of the words Eliot speaks, without noticing the mode he has established to speak them in; at first by the side of Pound, in later years in advance of him, he has brought back to variety and virility the English blank-verse line, making of it a medium for expressing an incalculable number of moods. It is worth quoting Eliot's conception of the well-written poem:

> where every word is at home,
> Taking its place to support the others,
> The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
> An easy commerce of the old and the new,
> The common word exact without vulgarity,
> The formal word precise but not pedantic,
> The complete consort dancing together.

Because they uncover new resources of English metre, Mr. Eliot's and Miss Sitwell's later poems are no doubt fated to have a wide influence. But no one will adequately succeed them who fails to remark the enormous powers of application which these poets have, and the sensitiveness to the details of orchestration which they have cultivated. Miss Sitwell writes often in what might once have been called *vers libre*; but her verse recalls Eliot's remark that 'no *vers* is *libre* to the man who wants to do a good job'. In Miss Sitwell, one is continually struck by the physical balance she observes between structure and diction, and between the claims of rhythm and rhyme. Her sentences, as frequently her lines, are long and often complex, their syntax is not always that of prose, their rhythms are large and

(*Continued on page 72*)

Poetry in War Time: I—The Older Poets

(*Continued from page 69*)

expanded. One cannot impose on these things any further complication: and her vocabulary, except for an occasional *recherché* word, is extremely simple; and the rhymes are equally simple and unemphatic. Yet the recognition of such technical necessities is not achieved casually.

These two poets, great innovators and great traditionalists, inevitably command most of our attention among the older poets of today. No other poets writing are as yet of the same high order. But two long poems by other poets stand out particularly. They too are Symbolist poems and they happen to use the same symbols as each other. In 'The Burning of the Leaves' (first published as 'The Ruins') Laurence Binyon found in Symbolism an access of power that was never his to so great an extent before. He was always a noble craftsman, but none of his earlier poetry has the classical calm, the mixture of warmth and austerity, that one finds here; it is a great poem, both immediately and residually satisfying. Ruins provide also the symbol for Miss Lilian Bowes Lyon's 'Evening in Stepney'. But not ruins alone: from the apparently devastated house which is her setting, pours out the unexpected living music of a Beethoven sonata. The implications of this juxtaposition of man's defeat and triumph are the 'terms of reference' for the meditation which the poem pursues. It is by no means a flawless poem, it is too clearly written under stress to be that; but it stays whole in the memory, and it contains magnificent lines and passages.

And what of the other poets whose names were already well known before September 1939? Two volumes by Auden have appeared, but they consist mainly of pre-war work; Spender, Empson, Madge and Barker have all published new volumes which have neither diminished nor increased one's estimate of them. There have been engaging 'selections' from Osbert Sitwell, William Plomer and John Lehmann. There have been books by Richard Church, Edmund Blunden and Herbert Read. I hope it is not a purely personal choice if I name three poets whom I find outstanding: Edwin Muir, Louis MacNeice and Cecil Day Lewis. Muir's *The Narrow Place* was a most striking book of lyric verse, profound, sombre and mature in feeling and extraordinarily fastidious and subtle in expression. He is a difficult poet to describe; the emotions in his poetry do not include joy or ecstasy and he therefore seems restricted. Yet his poems dig their insistent way in; and his power of moulding his short lines and phrases into a *legato* whole is a quite individual gift.

The two poets of the 'thirties who have best succeeded in being also poets of the 'forties are Louis MacNeice and Cecil Day Lewis. They have always had great curiosity and initiative in exploring new musical possibilities for the lyric. Some of their earlier experiments do not wear well: the effects of MacNeice's 'The Sunlight on the Garden', for example, or some of the curious early poems of Day Lewis, where one finds the rhymes put at the four corners of a stanza like stones holding down a table-cloth at a breezy picnic. In MacNeice's *Plant and Phantom* and in his poems published since, flashy wantonness has all but disappeared. The final 'Cradle Song' in the volume is very haunting; and some of his later topical poems (for example 'Brother Fire') have shown an honesty and calmness of approach unusual in war-time verse.

I conclude with Day Lewis's *Word Over All*. It contains war-poetry and poetry of the personal life, passionately written in either case, and yet full of a most moving dignity. Day Lewis can, like Eliot, Binyon and Miss Sitwell, occasionally send by a mere juxtaposition of words that extra, unearthly thrill over the body which does not come alone from the words' meanings. And in this volume we have that moving and gratifying spectacle of a poet finding a true poetic father: the influence of Hardy, assimilated lovingly and perfectly, is found in quite half of these poems. One feels that Day Lewis's love of music and of the musical aspects of poetry must inevitably have led him to a poet to whom verse, music and dancing were the enduring joys of life. It is with some lines from *Word Over All*, about poetry in war time, that these paragraphs may best close:

> Our words like poppies love the maturing field
> But form no harvest:
> May lighten the innocent's pang, or paint the dreams
> Where guilt is unharnessed.
> Dark over all, absolving all, is hung
> Death's vaulted patience:
> Words are to set man's joy and suffering there
> In constellations.

Film Guide

From MATTHEW NORGATE'S broadcast of January 14

WATERLOO ROAD: 'This British film is to my mind just the sort of picture—or anyway, one of the sorts—our studios ought to be making. It is essentially British, and it does not pretend to be anything it is not. It is about English people, and moreover English people who live in one perfectly identified district of London, the Waterloo Road. It was directed by Sidney Gilliat, who was a co-director of that extraordinarily good British film "Millions Like Us" John Mills plays a young soldier who has been told that his wife is playing around with a highly undesirable lady-killer of the locality, and Mills dashes home without waiting for his leave pass, hotly pursued by the Military Police. The lady-killer is played by Stewart Granger, for whom I have nothing but praise. Like Mills, he gets into the skin of the man he is playing. Then there is Alastair Sim, in what for him is rather a small part as a benevolent local doctor; and Joy Shelton, as the wife, again exactly right, with a sort of starry-eyed quality about her which makes her immensely attractive and appealing, without taking her out of character or giving her a lot of extraneous glamour, or any nonsense like that. And also, in a tiny cameo of a part, Jean Kent, a young actress of great intelligence. The one thing that "Waterloo Road" lacks and "Millions Like Us" did not lack is tenderness. I said it's the sort of picture British studios ought to be making. To that I must add that I don't believe it will be a big money-maker, especially outside this country. But if British studios had been making this sort of picture for the last twenty or thirty years—and there is no reason why they shouldn't have —"Waterloo Road" would have been a big money-maker, in America as well as here'.

SINCE YOU WENT AWAY: 'This is every bit as American in essence as "Waterloo Road" is British. It is not so truthful, I mean not so true to life, but it is touching. I don't mind admitting that it made me weep copiously. But the thing is that Hollywood has taught us to accept the American idiom and to like it, although so much about it is so foreign to us. "Since You Went Away" is an enormously long film, it runs for nearly three hours, and like "Gone With the Wind" I felt it would be greatly improved by being made a good deal shorter. It is a sort of American "Mrs. Miniver", about the impact of war on middle-class American people: Claudette Colbert as the mother of Jennifer Jones, aged 20 or so, and Shirley Temple, aged 14 or 15; Robert Walker, who was so good in 'See Here Private Hargrove", playing the same sort of part, the shy, rather gawky young soldier, rather gawkily falling in love with Jennifer Jones; Monty Woolley, sweetly acid as Walker's grandfather, and Joseph Cotton, a genial cynic, the good friend of Claudette Colbert and her husband.

'All these characters are blended into a picture of life during war time which may seem to us to be taking things far more emotionally, not to say hysterically, than the day-to-day conditions of war seem to warrant. Claudette Colbert is so upset when her husband goes away that you might think he was in action already, whereas he is really merely in a training camp in some other part of America. But Hollywood has taught us to accept all that as the natural order of things, and we do. Another ten years of films like "Waterloo Road", and perhaps we too may have persuaded other countries to accept our own idiom of film making and of life'.