William H. Pritchard

Seeing Through Everything

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To Marietta, who discriminates

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Author's Note and Acknowledgements

In this book I largely refrain from recounting the plots of novels or naming the themes and images of a poem, as if English literature between the two world wars is at the tip of everybody's recollection. This does not mean that my only fit audience is made up of professional students and readers of that literature; I should hope someone who, at some point in life, read a novel by Huxley or an Auden poem, could read with interest and profit my account of the writer in question. Although in most cases this account can be designated as Introductory, I have tried to introduce in the literal senses of the word: to bring into play reader and text; to lead the reader into relationships with distinctive styles and voices. This kind of activity seems to me usefully practised only in the presence of the novel or poem; so there is liberal quotation, followed by commentary, all of which takes space but is done in the belief that the part, carefully considered, can serve for the whole.

There is also liberal quotation from and reference to other critics, and here an eyebrow might be raised at any pretence to be writing for the intelligent general reader. Particularly in the Lawrence and Eliot chapters, hosts of secondary names crop up, or perhaps get in the way. My excuse is that they—these critics, that 'secondary' material—are in *my* way; but they enter this book I hope only to enable me to make a further, more refined point about the artist's procedures. I have been careful to supply page references and editions only when it seemed important for the general reader to know about them, or when the review or article had special claims to be looked up or was obscurely placed.

The suggestion that this book be written was made to me by Charles Monteith for whose subsequent kindnesses and encouragement I owe much thanks. In 1973–4 I was recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, and record my gratitude here, Frank Kermode generously provided me with an Honorary Research Fellowship which allowed me to use the welcome facilities of University College, London. I should also like to thank Warner Berthoff, C. J. Fox, Christopher Ricks and Julian Symons for their solicitude and their critical responses to the idea of this book. Mr. Symons deserves particular acknowledgement for his insistence that having started the book I should finish it. Mrs. James Crosson typed the manuscript; Francis Murphy and Marietta Pritchard each read it through and made useful, in an instance or two usefully deflationary, comments. No doubt more of that is in order. Finally I should like to express my immense debt to Reuben A. Brower whose lifetime defense of reading and whose imaginative questionings of what a reader does, have I hope made their mark on this book. My sadness is that he could not live to read it.

Speaking as an American whose experience of modern English writers did not begin until the 1950s, I recognize my distance from the literary heroes of this book. A stanza from Donald Davie's 'Remembering the Thirties' comes to mind:

> It dawns upon the veterans after all
> That what for them were agonies, for us
> Are highbrow thrillers, though historical;
> And all their feats quite strictly fabulous.

It has also dawned upon me, and so apologies to the veterans. But in writing about them I have tried at least to disdain the 'neutral tone' Davie goes on to speak of, in favor of subjectivity, preference, the belief that some writers and works of literature are better than others.

Introduction

1

This is a book without a thesis or overarching idea which holds together and makes comprehensible the fact of English literature between the two world wars. Without such a unifier, why then write another book about some literary figures—poets, novelists, critics—whose productions have already been extensively and sometimes intelligently discussed? For it is not merely the major figures, such as Eliot or D. H. Lawrence, about whom hundreds of books and articles have been written; even writers of less than major rank—Huxley Forster, Auden—have received at least their due, have had their books recalled, their plots and themes traced, images noted, symbolic continuities delineated. And if there is no dearth of books on individual talents, the period's writing as a whole has been surveyed a number of times: in Walter Allen's *Tradition and Dream*, in W. W. Robson's *Modern English Literature* and in Martin Seymour-Smith's *Guide to World Literature*. The conspicuous lack is of a book, neither survey, history, nor intensive treatment of two or three writers, which attempts to move more or less chronologically through the period and come to terms with its most significant and enduring literary monuments. Such a book—which the present one tries to be —would presume to deal with the fifteen or so most important English writers over the years 1918–40. Unlike surveys pressed for space, its commentary would not be hurried, would not mention the names of all Huxley's novels nor furnish one or two lines in capsule summary of their themes and content. Rather, it would direct itself towards the problematic element in the individual writer and attempt to raise fundamental questions about what it is like to read Huxley or

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Ford or Orwell, both as individual talents with distinctive styles and as writers who take their places beside one another in a literary and social climate.

That it is these and not some other writers who take their places beside each other here is due in part to the critic's exercise of judgement. Lawrence or Eliot could scarcely be excluded from any such treatment; but what about Dylan Thomas, and why Anthony Powell at some length rather than Graham Greene or Henry Green? Various moments of nervously defensive explanation within this book will suggest that I found the problem of exclusion a troubling one and that particular solutions bring less than full satisfaction. But some general lines for exclusion can be laid down at the outset: first the omission, except through glancing reference, of three major 'modernist' writers—Yeats, Joyce and Pound. They are not English born, but neither was T. S. Eliot who figures prominently in these pages; their work has elicited much commentary but not more than some others discussed here. At a later point I address myself to why this is a book about writers other than in Wyndham Lewis's phrase, 'The Men of 1914' and why, since there is no comparable presiding genius, these years between the wars can't be called—as Hugh Kenner called the years just before 1920—The Pound Era or anybody else's era. Practically I could find no way to include Pound, Yeats and Joyce without committing myself to the grossest simplification of their work—compressed treatment to the point of useless or oblique gesture. Moreover, and unlike the two other Men of 1914, these three writers were simply not *in* England during these years; the realm of myth and heroic literature was their true place of residence. Whether in Sligo or Paris or Rapallo, they climbed to the top of their respective towers and, in the Yeatsian phrase, preoccupied themselves with 'mere images'—even though Pound and Yeats also considered themselves to be profound analysts of the modern world.

Eliot and Wyndham Lewis, on the other hand, did not go so far upstairs, or at least came down to answer the doorbell when some rash intruder rang. These two writers, the central pillars of strength as well as—to confess it now—my own favorite modern literary men, are preeminently on the scene, in journalistic and critical as well as 'creative' ways. They saw themselves as guardians and sceptical

critics of literary and cultural, of 'liberal' values; each took himself to be Matthew Arnold's successor in that line. And unlike Yeats or Pound or Joyce, their thought and their argument are not fiercely transformative—even with Eliot's religion and Lewis's god-appointed sense of personal mission—of ordinary, common-sense controversy. They argued, that is, with Lawrence or Virginia Woolf or Forster in ways that didn't take the debate into another realm. And though cosmopolitan and unprovincial enough in their attitudes, they never made, in Pound's ironic phrase about *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, 'so distinct a farewell to London' that we have to remind ourselves they are English writers. In this sense Eliot and Lewis are the main supports and instructors of my own criticism; they help me to believe that English literature between the wars is something more than an academic convenience.

Other omissions have simpler or cruder reasons behind them: a disinclination to break out of or say farewell to London in order to consider the work of David Jones or Hugh MacDiarmid or even Dylan Thomas; a lack of conviction that still unacknowledged 'genius' writers like T. F. or John Cowper Powys, like Dorothy Richardson or Edith Sitwell, are geniuses indeed, or that they provide imaginative satisfactions of an order provided by my chosen writers; a simple regret that interesting novelists who emerged in the 1930s—like Elizabeth Bowen or Henry Green—are allowed no room here. What began with a resolve not to confine the notion of imaginative writing merely to novels and poems, turned out to be more bound by those genres, and by literary criticism, than is no doubt healthy: thus the absence of T. E. Lawrence or R. G. Collingwood, or any of the lively autobiographies and memoirs from the late 1920s and '30s by Graves, Lewis and Ford, or a book of literary-social criticism such as Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Except for Shaw, no dramatists are considered.

The survivors are roughly seventeen in number and come in for varying amounts of attention, with Lawrence, Eliot and Lewis receiving most of it. An attempt is sometimes made here to characterize or speculate about literary climate—as with English poetry and criticism in the 1920s, or satirical fiction in the next decade—but never to explain the books by generalizations about The Age. I am myself surprised how little good it does, when trying to pay attention

to a poem by Auden or a novel by Waugh, to fortify oneself with truths about the condition of England at that time, the 'social back ground' we sometimes pretend lies behind works of art. Wherever such background does or doesn't lie, useful commentary about literature has all it can do to cope with the pleasures and difficulties of the text itself; with, certainly in the case of these writers, what lies on the surface of the prose or poetry. Eliot should be thanked for saving the word 'superficial' from simple connotations of unworthy and shallow triviality, by reminding us instead that a solid superficies can be a thing of beauty. From Shaw to Graves to Orwell, English literature between the wars shows at least that virtue, whatever the resonances or adequacies of its deeper tones.

A word about method should introduce an unmethodological book. Although F. R. Leavis comes in for some animadversions in these pages, I have no desire to gainsay what seem to me the inescapable formulations about the function of criticism he made in his chapter 'Literary Studies' from *Education and the University*:

> Literary history, as a matter of 'facts about' and accepted critical (or quasi-critical) description and commentary, is a worthless acquisition; worthless for the student who cannot as a critic—that is, as an intelligent and discerning reader—make a personal approach to the essential data of the literary historian, the works of literature (an approach is personal or it is nothing: you cannot take over the appreciation of a poem, and unappreciated, the poem isn't 'there').

It is good to have the student in this paragraph because so much of my own argument about and discussion of books takes place in a classroom 'where I am saying, 'This is so, isn't it?' waiting for somebody to reply Yes, but', or 'No, not exactly'. Leavis of course opens the gates to the, 'student'—or to whatever we call ourselves—by holding up the 'personal approach' as a *sine qua non* of literary response. And though there is always the danger of elevating the personal approach into a substitute for accurate remarks about texts, that danger will be risked. I read Leavis's final sentence here—'you cannot take over the appreciation of a poem, and unappreciated, the poem isn't "there" '—as an interesting reminder that one builds on the appreciations of earlier readers but can't use them as established truth about the text,

and has instead to perform the work of 'appreciation' over again, or as if for the first time. So I plan to engage in such appreciation here, exercised quite selectively on single books or passages from books whose authors wrote more than I begin to take account of.

One further principle, expressed in R. P. Blackmur's statement about the 'relativism' of the critic:

> He knows that the institution of literature, so far as it is alive, is made again at every instant. It is made afresh as part of the process of being known afresh; what is permanent is what is always fresh, and it can be fresh only in performance—that is, in reading and seeing and hearing what is actually in it at this place and this time . . . the critic brings to consciousness the means of performance.
>
> ('A Burden for Critics')

Whether or not Blackmur meant it, the ideal place for such performance—'reading and seeing and hearing what is actually in it at this place and this time'—is in a classroom with students; lacking them, one's critical performance tries to bring literature to consciousness without vocal and gestural aids. But like Leavis, Blackmur insists that we behave as if the book were not a settled thing with meanings to be pronounced upon or a literary structure noted and outlined; we must speak back to the book, try, in Emerson's phrase, to draw a 'circle' around it and thus, though only for the moment, hold it in a new relation.

It is perhaps vain to believe that the institution of literature, as it reveals itself to us during the years 1918–40, can be made afresh by an individual act of juxtaposing what one sees as the best writers and best books of that age; but, with such admirable and available writers and books who would want to attempt less? Empson tells us that all good poetry is ambiguous; the best poetry, novels and criticism written during these years is ambiguous in a way that resists any brisk, surveying commentary which would pin down their art in a page or two. They need rather to be seen, however briefly, in their vulnerabilities and weaknesses, the better to arrive at a sense of their strengths. And of their strangenesses: raised as they are beyond the ordinary by their exemplary displays of wit, of sanity, of hopeless yearning, of high contempt.

2

Pronouncements by one writer on another, or on the character of a literary period, make special claims on our interest—especially if we respect the writers in question. I want to begin consideration of some English writers whose work falls between the two world wars by consulting what three of them—George Orwell, Virginia Woolf, Wyndham Lewis—said about the change which came over English literature some time between 1910 and the end of World War I. And although there is no reason to believe that later scholars or critics have explained what happened any better than those who were on the scene, I shall consider one recent attempt to compare postwar English writers with their modernist contemporaries.

Orwell's fine essay 'Inside the Whale', written in 1940, is itself a work of art, an endlessly rereadable three-part sequence that begins with an appreciation of Henry Miller, moves on to define some differences between pre- and post-World War I literature, then between 1930s writers and those of the previous decade, finally coming back to Miller and out to general statements about the writer and politics. Orwell dwells rather exclusively on Housman as a powerful writer on the imagination of those who were adolescents in 1910–25, then identifies a postwar group of writers of 'completely different tendency' from Housman and the Georgian nature poets. This postwar group is seen as comprising Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Huxley and Lytton Strachey. They form 'the movement', and if (Orwell argues) Yeats is outside it and Forster really predates it and Somerset Maugham should be added even though literarily he doesn't 'belong', those exceptions substantiate its identity as *the* significant group of men of letters after 1918—Virginia Woolf going unmentioned by Orwell. He admits that this group doesn't look like a group since many of the writers would have resented being coupled with each other, indeed were actively antipathetic to each other; yet what holds them together is, in Orwell's phrase, *pessimism of outlook*.

Orwell tries out other terms to characterize the thread holding this group together: 'tragic sense of life', but that seems too stiff and portentous; hostility to the idea of progress—the belief that it ought

not to happen; most valuably, the sense that these writers 'see through' all systems and ideals under which their predecessors had enlisted themselves. This last term provides a useful, if dangerously abstract, way of holding Orwell's 'modern' writers together. For example, take the following list of works published 1918–21 (some had been written earlier)—'Gerontion', *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, *Women in Love*, *Tarr*, *Crome Yellow*, *Eminent Victorians*—and consider how much of their imaginative energy is generated out of seeing through, as Stephen Dedalus put it, those big words which make us so unhappy. Orwell doesn't exploit the possibilities of the phrase 'seeing through' as much as he with justice might have; for if its main thrust is towards a piercing exposure of pretense, an unmasking of what passes for high and commendable motive, it offers also the possibility of a further step towards the visionary: you may see through a flimsy structure of lies in order to glimpse, behind the façade, more compelling motives and truer objects of allegiance. Surely the figures of Gerontion, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, Rupert Birkin, Frederick Tarr, Stephen Dedalus himself, have yearnings to establish life-giving contact with something beyond the merely social, mundane and therefore, in their absolutist vision of things, inevitably corrupted world. So there is at least the possibility, and one which their creators are active in exploring, that seeing through something results in seeing something more worth seeing.

The clever turn in Orwell's discussion of what he terms the postwar era of 'cosmic despair', 'the skulls and cactuses, the yearning after lost faith and impossible civilisations', comes when he asks rhetorically whether this phenomenon might not have occurred precisely *because* it was an exceedingly comfortable time, those postwar years: 'Everyone with a safe £500 a year turned highbrow and began training himself in *taedium vitae*. It was an age of eagles and of crumpets, facile despairs, backyard Hamlets, cheap return tickets to the end of the night.' This is lively and engaging polemic, yet beyond mentioning one novel Orwell doesn't specify the sorts of merely fashionable works he has in mind, and presumably his major moderns didn't write them, since their despair was authentic. In any case the sweeping analysis leaves out or explains too much to be fully acceptable. Of the major writers in the period 1918–30, Orwell insists that their

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