

## REVIEWS

LAST ESSAYS. By G. M. Young. (Rupert Hart-Davis; 9s. 6d.)

COLLECTED IMPRESSIONS. By Elizabeth Bowen. (Longmans; 16s.)

ENGLISH POETRY. By Leone Vivante. (Faber; 21s.)

SCIENCE AND ENGLISH POETRY. By Douglas Bush. (O.U.P.; 16s.)

Whatever Mr Young writes will be read if only for the fine style, though he himself would be the first to disclaim that as a sufficient recommendation, for it is his belief that total reality is greater than any of its parts and real history is more than can be enshrined (or entombed) in books. As with so many of his eminent contemporaries in the teaching of history and literature, Mr Young's spiritual home is Greece and Rome. His master historian is Tacitus, his first critic Longinus. So when such scholars hail, albeit reluctantly, history as the educational discipline of the future we may at least take leave to wonder whether their counterparts of a generation hence, nurtured on Macaulay or Fisher without Tacitus, will be comparable in stature to their sires. The classical schools of some fifty years ago have in fact produced many leading English historians and literary critics, but it is questionable whether the reading of the great modern historians will do the same. Great as they are, Macaulay and Acton are not so near to the roots of European civilisation as Tacitus, Herodotus, Xenophon and Caesar, and great minds can only spring from deep roots.

Miss Bowen like Mr Young needs no introduction. In a book of mixed quality the chief interest centres on a novelist's own notes on novel-writing. We are permitted to witness her mind at work and learn something of her beliefs. A novel is a 'non-poetic statement of poetic truth', and like a poem, a piece of music or another work of art, has some form of life of its own, so that the reader and the writer in a great measure share the same experience, though the writer's 'perceptions should be always just in advance'. But Miss Bowen is worried by moral 'pre-assumptions'. 'Pre-assumptions are bad'.

There lies the difference between Miss Bowen and Signor Vivante, and incidentally Signor Vivante's greatness. Where Miss Bowen confuses moral assumptions, fidelity to poetic truth and artistic detachment, Signor Vivante makes it clear that these things co-exist and overlap without intrusion or interference. 'Art theories generally fail because they neglect or refuse to consider that the distinctive elements of art are one thing, while its fundamental elements are another.' Signor Vivante is by profession a philosopher and he works at a deeper level than the modern impressionist critic. His book is too fine to be described by crude superlatives, but he has said what needed saying more than anything else today. The most popular fashion in contemporary criticism may be described as an agnostic impressionism which

has little use for absolute values and, at its best, sees in the artist a man who is faithful to his personal 'vision' of reality. Hence the interminable disputes about morality and art, didacticism in art, the Catholic novel, etc., etc. Signor Vivante maintains that in all true poets there is 'a claim to ultimate truth which is essential to their poetic value'. (As an elaboration of Keats' famous theme this is of course invaluable.) This is 'truth, not as an object of teaching, but as an immanent cause of poetry'. Such truth is eternal and may be captured in a transient moment of time, and yet it is never finally captured and so at the heart of all poetry lies the idea that life holds death at its core. 'He who lives *originally* is familiar with the thought of death because his particular self is felt as but fuel to the original flame.' Signor Vivante lays out the evidence for such belief from some dozen and a half English poets. He does not however rationalise at the expense of sensation, he is too aware of the unity of substantial form. To under-rate sensation is 'a most lamentable and, in my opinion, almost incredible error'. Nevertheless the spiritual element remains supreme for it is the total reality that is under review. The moral value of art therefore is 'to vindicate that which is human, and, more than human, essential and universal because of its intimate and profoundly original character'. While writing profoundly on poetry Signor Vivante throws light on its relationship to prayer and mysticism because he comments on art and life. This book could well be read in conjunction with C. Day Lewis's *The Poetic Image*, and then it remains to recall the proof from design for the existence of God.

Professor Bush looks at English poetry from a more specialised but no less important viewpoint. The treatment is only as sketchy as is inevitable in a series of lectures, but two qualities distinguish the work, Mr Bush's refreshing directness of speech, and the firmness and clarity of his views on the nature of poetry. Thus we read in the first lecture, 'science, which is devoted to the discovery of verifiable truth about nature, and the means of controlling nature, is not at all concerned about the worth and dignity of nature and man—though scientists, as men, may be'. Apart from showing that the author has read his Aristotle, it is an example of his inoffensive yet uncompromising manner of stating unpalatable truths. And again, 'it is important to remember what was forgotten by a number of later eighteenth-century men (and has been forgotten by a number of modern writers) that Newton did not make gravitation an attribute of matter or the universe a self-running mechanism'. Which, more tersely, means Newton was not God Almighty. At the same time Mr Bush can when he wishes put a keen edge, usually a double one, to his remarks: 'Pope was much too clever to be a philosopher'.

This keenness and smoothness of style spring from a deeper and more important clearness of mind. Of all writers perhaps the literary critic is nowadays the most prone to muddleheadedness; in the first place he is easily allowed to escape into the realm of nebulous and tortuous abstractions, and in the second place it is not clearly enough recognised that views of literature presuppose views on life, and the 'aesthetics' of Jean-Paul Sartre and Benedetto Croce are granted a status in their own right which of their nature no 'aesthetics' can have. In yet a third place many literary critics who profess no more than an orthodox 'commonsense' view of life so qualify and limit their literary statements in order not to offend the honest agnostic that they almost render themselves unintelligible. In this respect, for instance, Signor Vivante is considerably more difficult to read than Mr Bush. Though he might never consider putting it into words, Mr Bush accepts the Aristotelian hierarchy of the sciences, and states quite clearly his belief that poetry and religion are inseparable, for 'a completely non-religious poet is almost a contradiction in terms'; and at the same time he ranges himself alongside Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist, in the belief that 'there is no real clashing at all betwixt any genuine point of Christianity and what true philosophy and right reason does determine or allow. . . . there is a perpetual peace and agreement between truth and truth, be they of what nature or kind so ever'.

There is the quality of Mr Bush's thought: clear, uncompromising, outspoken, yet withal sensitive to opposed views. Thus he perceives the religious foundation upon which all Shakespeare's work was built: 'his characters speak, act and are judged in relation to a religious and ethical philosophy of order, and are not merely observed with objective detachment or in a moral vacuum'. How satisfying it is to hear a modern critic put popular 'objective detachment' firmly in its place. Similarly he perceives the medievalism of Spenser's thought and his personal taste, and the almost rebellious orthodoxy of Marlowe's *Faustus* (it is a pity he did not also investigate *Edward II*). His touch is equally firm in the twentieth century where he names the alienation of the poet from society and the decay of belief in absolute values as the two chief causes making modern poetry what it is. Yet even at its sharpest it is no Cassandra-like bewailing of modern philistinism. Mr Bush believes in the perennial importance of poetry for the human race: 'Whatever the varying motives and the varying adequacy of poets in this or that period, the poetic apprehension of life has its own validity: and the essential function of poetry is to preserve, discipline, and enrich the humanity, humility and spirituality of man in the midst of the dehumanising forces that more and more envelop him'.

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