WHISKING ABOUT

VED MEHTA: *Fly and the Fly-Bottle.* Encounters with British Intellectuals. 214pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 25s.

Whatever the political status of Britain in the world today, it is comforting to know that our intellectual controversies are still an international cynosure; and even more satisfying that the English language is the natural medium for their exposition by an Asian to an American audience. Mr. Ved Mehta is an Indian educated at Balliol, writing in the first place for publication in the *New Yorker*, whose readers presumably need no introduction to his dramatis personae, all of whom are to be found in Oxford, Cambridge or London. It would be impossible to detect that he was not an Englishman writing for Englishmen, if it were not for the very rare solecism which catches the eye, such as the description of Sir Lewis Namier "hunting with an old gun". At the same time it is salutary for the Englishman to appreciate that Mr. Mehta's two principal heroes, who dominate his little book from beyond the grave, were both Central Europeans: the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Polish Lewis Namier.

Mr. Mehta's four entrancing essays are concerned with two intensely English *odia*: the *odium philosophicum* and the *odium historicum*, which between them have displaced the obsolete theological variant. His interest in the philosophers was stimulated by the controversy which broke out, principally in the correspondence columns of *The Times*, over the refusal of the editor of *Mind*, Professor Gilbert Ryle, to admit a review of Mr. Ernest Gellner's book attacking what is conveniently known as the Oxford school of philosophy (which originated, as Mr. Mehta delights to remind his American readers, in Cambridge). The correspondence columns of *The Times Literary Supplement* furnished the starting-point for the second half of Mr. Mehta's book, which examines the conflicts between British historians, as particularly exemplified by the argument over Mr. A. J. P. Taylor's *Origins of the Second World War*. Mr. Mehta sees both controversies chiefly in personal terms. He has interviewed most of the surviving participants, ingeniously playing the role of an historian among the philosophers and a philosopher among the historians. If the result is a best-seller, it is amply deserved.

Essentially the book can be described as a quest for the two great personalities of Wittgenstein and Namier through their influence on pupils and rivals. In the first half Mr. Mehta interviews most of the leading philosophers of the day: Ernest Gellner, who started the row, and Bertrand Russell, who shares his contempt for the Oxford tradition of the "gentleman intellectual"; Richard Hare, who abhors the gramophone because it compels him to choose his own music, and Iris Murdoch, even more distinguished as a philosopher than as a novelist; Geoffrey Warnock and P. F. Strawson, the heirs of the formidable Austin; Gilbert Ryle; and A. J. Ayer, who thinks the B.B.C. a wonderful institution; Stuart Hampshire, who found the difference between London and Oxford to be that in London you could get locked out of your own room at the university. Interlaced between these is a fairly skilful attempt at *haute vulgarisation* of the philosophical points at issue. Mr. Mehta was much helped in his quest by a young contemporary of his own at the university, disguised under the name of "John", and also apparently by the willingness of his subjects to read and correct his drafts. Not surprisingly he quotes without dissent Professor Ayer's verdict that the *sine qua non* of philosophers is vanity.

In the second half of the book Mr. Mehta applies the same treatment to the leading British historians. In their case no single controversy emerges to group them into rival armies, nor can they be categorized in terms of Oxford and Cambridge or London. The personality of Mr. Taylor helps to draw the battle lines, but he is not alone in this catalytic function: Dr. Toynbee is another magnet of controversy; Mr. E. H. Carr yet another; and they are just as liable to attack each other as to fend off the attacks of the historical Establishment, represented by Professor Trevor-Roper and Sir Isaiah Berlin. Mr. Mehta has met them all, as well as a great many others on the fringes of debate, such as Dr. C. V. Wedgwood, Professor Geyl and Lady Namier. He is at his best in describing their eccentricities—for instance, Sir Lewis Namier's favourite surviving pupil, who still talks of the great man in the present tense and wears an electric waistcoat plugged into the electric light in cold weather. But again beneath the urbane superficiality of Mr. Mehta's snapshot portraits there is a sympathetic feeling for the issues at stake.

The issues go far beyond the rights and wrongs of contemporary philosophies or theories of history. As Mr. Mehta says of the vagaries of one of the historians, "perhaps the explanation . . . lay not with him but with England". His book is not simply about historians and philosophers and their wrangles, but about "the intellectual atmosphere of Britain . . . thickening with hundreds of other altercations until the air choked with a miasmic, blinding fog". In spite of the engaging friendliness with which Mr. Mehta writes about us, such a sentence—there are not many of them—gives disquieting food for thought. If he had the pen of Swift, or if he had not enjoyed his education at Balliol, or if he did not, in his own words, "care for the repute of British philosophy", the intellectual atmosphere of Britain could have been much less agreeably described.

Siamese Poem

I CAN *break anything*
But I can't break this longing:
Why can everything be dissolved
Except this love ever?

SUNTHORN PHU (from "Nirat Inao")
Translated by Ousa Weys and G. W. Robinson

BACK TO THE POET

D. W. HARDING: *Experience into Words.* Essays on poetry. 199pp. Chatto and Windus. 21s.

Professor Harding was one of the first contributors to *Scrutiny*, and several of the essays in this volume are taken from its pages. But, as the man who is now Professor of Psychology at London University, he has always been a Scrutineer with a difference. *Experience into Words* raises questions that no one has ever expressed in quite the same way.

Like most English critics of recent times, he is very conscious of the importance when dealing with poetry of fastening exegesis and evaluation firmly to the words on the page. But he is more conscious than other critics have been for a long time of the fact that those words are only there because they satisfied the poet. So he finds his main interest in poetry hovering somewhere between why a poem gives *us* satisfaction, if it does, and why it gave the poet satisfaction when he laid down his pen. Usually—without explicitly saying so—he makes what seems the reasonable assumption that the reward to us in terms of new feelings and perceptions must be very close to the poet's own aim in writing the poem. Of course our individual psychological states are rarely likely to be the same as the poet's; but his words are at one and the same time his private triumph and the means by which we can in imagination share it.

In the first essay, on John Donne, Professor Harding does not broach these theoretical problems but gives us a straight reading of Donne's temperament as the poems seem to express it. It is a very satisfying piece, combining a frank, almost old-fashioned curiosity about John Donne as a man, with a rigorous sense of what is admissible evidence about the matter in the poems, and tactful but penetrating reference throughout to Freudian conceptions. In the essays on Blake and Coleridge he displays and discusses his strategy more openly. He quotes an account by an American psychoanalyst, Mr. David Beres, of *The Ancient Mariner* that he regards as "a clear instance of psychological doctrines being imported into the poem": Mr. Beres too loosely identifies the albatross as a "mother" symbol, losing all the richness of the associations that Coleridge consciously put into the albatross's role in the story. On the other hand he is sure that we may take the tale of the mariner's experiences as an indirect account of Coleridge's inner struggles for self-reliance provided we *start* as literary critics with a proper delicacy in our sensitivity to words: and he expands on how it may be done. He is sure that he wishes to reject sweeping metaphysical interpretations of Blake's symbolism, and sure, too, that it can be shown to reflect Blake's growing understanding and mastery of his own psychological conflicts if examined with discreet use of modern psychological thought. The last essay in the book is the most ambitious in this field; it does not make much direct reference to literature, but gives a vivid account of how partly formed ideas and attitudes in the pre-conscious may issue in words that "discover and release" them. Professor Harding then goes on to compare language that emerges in this way with the language of symbolist poetry—not pushing the comparison very far, but at least opening up a route to the study of much modern literature that has not been considered before.

A different pleasure is to be found in a study in the middle of the book of Mr. T. S. Eliot's plays. This is again a straightforward psychoanalytical-type interpretation, this time not of the author but of the characters in the plays. It gives us one of the best accounts yet of the strength of Mr. Eliot's realism, the toughness of his knowledge of real people that is perhaps not often enough thought of as one of his main gifts as a writer.

BEHIND THE JOKES SOME SENSE

NANCY HALE: *The Realities of Fiction.* 247pp. Macmillan. 21s.

At one point in this chattily discursive bundle of lectures (delivered, among other places, at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference at Middlebury College in Vermont) Miss Hale tosses a gracious passing bouquet to "that old nonesuch W. Somerset Maugham". One wonders if she recalls the acid digression about books such as hers which Mr. Maugham put into *Cakes and Ale*:

> I read *The Craft of Fiction* by Mr. Percy Lubbock, from which I learned that the only way to write novels was like Henry James; after that I read *Aspects of the Novel* by Mr. E. M. Forster, from which I learned that the only way to write novels was like Mr. E. M. Forster; then I read *The Structure of the Novel* by Mr. Edwin Muir, from which I learned nothing at all.

What he would make of *The Realities of Fiction* is a little doubtful. Miss Hale—so bright and loquacious and ingenuously disarming, with a pussy-old-me technique to carry off her random *obiter dicta* on Thomas Wolfe or the creative imagination or writer's block—is at first sight an almost too easy target for the snide critic:

> Oneself is not to be sneezed at as an idea for characters. Far from being just one person—just old I, that familiar soul so fond of putting her foot in her mouth—I am made up, as all human beings are, of dozens of fragments glued together by the grace of God into a person.

But when one has finished laughing at this sort of *bêtise*, one realizes that Miss Hale, despite her unfortunate literary manner, is a mine of practical common sense about the business of writing: she is a writer's critic, balancing midway between the poles of style and character-analysis, digressive, surprisingly acute on the Hemingway short stories and never above a bit of cheerful—but always pointed—clowning:

> At a lecture of Auden's one spring in Oxford, I heard someone say of him, "I like the shape of his mind but not its contents". It brought to mind a picture, far from accurate, of Mr. Auden's head as a kind of exquisite Lowestoft bowl with nothing in it but some stale corn flakes.

And who, one wonders, is the laugh on there?

LANGLAND'S WAY

JOHN LAWLOR: *Piers Plowman.* 340pp. Edward Arnold. £2 10s.

It is just twelve years since Professor George Kane, in a still valuable and stimulating essay, pointed out that in spite of general agreement about *Piers Plowman* as a great work of literature, critical study of the poem had almost entirely neglected its literary qualities. Discussions regarding the textual relationship of the three versions began in the last century soon after Skeat's edition had made *Piers Plowman* available to a wide public; and to these succeeded early in the present century an argument about single or multiple authorship which was happily forgotten in the 1930s, when there began a series of interpretations of the poem's *sentence*. Professor Kane's own study, however, demonstrated effectively the prime difficulty confronting any critic of Langland's work, which is that its author presupposes a body of ideas and attitudes, both philosophical and literary, common to himself and to his readers, which need in our day to be first isolated and considered in some detail before the poet's artistic achievement can be understood. Such an analysis Professor Kane did not attempt within the limits of his essay, and he was therefore forced to beg some important questions which other students of the poem either did not understand or could not allow. Now, at last, Professor Lawlor has provided an essential handbook to *Piers Plowman* and has initiated a significant and comprehensive study of its literary merits.

Professor Lawlor writes "to assist an unskilled reader in a first reading of the poem" in the B-text. He divides his book into two main parts. The first is "a step-by-step reading of the poem in which the ideas are examined in the order in which they exist in the work". This analysis is brilliantly achieved; and it is at all points cleverly related (in such a way as to cause no confusion in the reader's progressive understanding of the subject-matter of the poem) to the detailed discussion of the distinctive literary techniques employed by the poet, which constitutes the second part of the book. Time and again one is struck by the efficient manner in which Professor Lawlor contrives to elucidate the thought of the poem clearly and in detail without prejudice to the conflicting views still held on the interpretation of certain key passages of the work. Inevitably, in an analysis of this kind, certain difficulties have to be glossed over (such as the Tree of Charity in Passus xvi) or somewhat facilely explained (as the summary of the Incarnation and Redemption in the same Passus), but such passing-by of problems is surprisingly rare. And some scholars will take issue with Professor Lawlor's downright choice of Law and Love (following here Professor E. Talbot Donaldson) as the motivating factors of Passus i-xiv. Nevertheless, the analysis on the whole is a most reliable and satisfying and extremely able exposition of the text which will be of enormous benefit not only to Professor Lawlor's "general reader" but to all serious students of the poem.

The second part of the book is the most comprehensive discussion so far attempted of Langland's poetic technique. Professor Lawlor's method here is rather discursive, for the distinction between the subject-matter of the three chapters of Part II is more apparent than real: one must pay tribute to the generosity of Professor Lawlor's publishers in allowing him in these days so much space to develop his study of the poem's rhythm, speech, argument, allegory, similitude, and wordplay in what one might describe as a series of concentric circles. The method involves repetition; but as used here it does also lead to clearer understanding and appreciation of Langland's literary genius, for it allows a large number of illustrative passages and Professor Lawlor shows remarkable felicity in his choice of these and admirable skill in his close verbal analysis of them. The foundation of meaning firmly laid in Part I gives relevance and authority to all aspects of the treatment of Langland as a poet in Part II; and Professor Lawlor displays to us at work a very great poet indeed. This book ushers in a new era in *Piers Plowman* criticism.