

## The Long Perspective

***The Ever-Present Past***, by Edith Hamilton, with Prologue by Doris Fielding Reid. *New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1964. 189 pp. \$4.05.*

EDITH HAMILTON, who died in May, 1963, achieved fame as a brilliant popularizer of the classics. Her favorite themes were the glory that was Greece and, with considerably less enthusiasm, the grandeur that was Rome. The collected essays in this volume serve to broaden appreciation of Miss Hamilton's literary scope, for they reveal as much familiarity with Corneille and Goethe, with William Faulkner and Dylan Thomas, as with Aeschylus or Euripides.

We owe this posthumous anthology to the affection and good judgment of Doris Fielding Reid, who was a student under Miss Hamilton at the Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore when this century was young and who returned to live with her in later years. After the last war their home in Washington became a much esteemed salon, where old and new friends were privileged to enjoy gracious hospitality seasoned with Edith's always pungent observations on *The Ever-Present Past*. It is an admirable title, for the entire book as well as for the opening selection. And Miss Reid's reminiscent Prologue serves as the perfect introduction.

It carries a reference to what has well been called Miss Hamilton's "high, mysterious power." That power, never austere or ponderous, often charmingly whimsical, comes through to the reader in all the articles, reviews and lectures, covering a span of over thirty years, which are here assembled. But the secret of this power is not really recondite. It is found in transcendent honesty, combined with invincible idealism. These were her lance and buckler in intellectual jousting.

In these pages more than a few plumed knights go down in disarray. In the earliest (1929) of the selections Miss Hamilton unhorses a number of *These Sad Young Men*. Since those left strewn on the field are in no case still young, and in some instances no longer professionally misanthropic, it would be unkind to list the casualties. But the

chink found in Aldous Huxley's once shining armor should not be overlooked. "We would enjoy him as a kind of twentieth-century Jane Austen if he would only leave the universe alone and learn to laugh at himself."

Some of Miss Hamilton's targets, such as Dylan Thomas, in retrospect seem scarcely worthy of her steel. But when it is employed on William Faulkner one reads attentively. The Nobel Prize for Literature is not awarded to collectors of garbage.

"Mr. Faulkner's novels," she comments, "are about ugly people in an ugly land. There is no beauty anywhere." As "a violently twisted Puritan," she sees in him an extremism similar to that which snared the romantics when they closed their eyes to everything disagreeable. Faulkner is therefore tagged a sentimentalist, because: "The extremely unpleasant can be extremely sentimental."

Miss Hamilton is bothered by the contrast between Faulkner's constant emphasis on human futility and his remarks on receiving the high award, in which he emphasized the duty and privilege of an author to be inspiring. She is too straightforward to let such contradictions pass. Of Faulkner she concludes: "When he accepted the prize in those words of singular nobility and profound truth, he was pronouncing the condemnation of the work which had won him the prize."

Goethe is much more time-tested than Faulkner and certainly less easily assailable. That does not deter Miss Hamilton in her role of critic. The essay on *Goethe and Faust* is especially interesting for the neat way in which she identifies the great German's "blind spot of egotism," more charitably described as "his power to live with people on his own terms." Why this trait could not properly be characterized as selfishness, but was rather Goethe's reasoned road to serenity of spirit, is a memorable example of psychological analysis.

All this is not to say that Miss Hamilton has unqualified admiration only for her beloved Greeks. Two associated essays, though first published ten years apart, are almost lyrical about the Seventeenth Century French dramatists. In the first of these, on *Comedy*, we are told that "no comedy has ever been modelled upon Shakespeare; all comedies have been modelled upon Molière." That sounds arbitrary, but there is deft argument as to why: "The comedy of wit has dominated the comedy of humor."

The companion essay is *Tragedy As They Order It In France* where the aim, as exemplified by Corneille and Racine, is "not to set the hearer to weeping or to trembling, but to arouse his

attention to the pure grandeur of the heroic." The "crystalline lucidity which France loves above all else" naturally has deep appeal for Edith Hamilton, since it is her love too. The intellect, she says in one of these essays, should always serve to "clarify and simplify." Hers did so, supremely well, though there are instances which could be called over-simplification.

To Edith Hamilton's admirers, and they are many, the intimacy of these selections will have a special appeal. Whatever the subject, more so because they are so varied, the personality of the author permeates: her scorn of pretense and ostentation; her devotion to sincerity and beauty; her innate but always nicely balanced conservatism. A curious result is that the theme not infrequently seems less significant than the personality that is developing it.

In this small chaplet of well-cut gems it is not easy to have a preference. But certainly one of the most thought-provoking is the recent (1960) and heretofore unpublished address on *The Way of the Church*. "The Way," to Miss Hamilton, is always the Latin *via*. She is by no means sure that it was for the best when the young Christian Church turned from the *Via Dolorosa* of fallen Greece to the *Via Gloriosa* of then ascendant Rome. In the long perspective, to which she seeks to attune American thinking, Edith would exchange the adjectives.

Reviewed by FELIX MORLEY