

Approach to Avernus

Journey Through Despair, 1880-1914: Transformations in British Literary Culture, by John A. Lester, Jr., *Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968. 211 pp. \$6.00.*

AN EVER-INCREASING number of books—biographies, correspondence, critical studies—now being published shows that European civilization in the years before the Great War is being scrutinized from diverse cultural angles. It is a period often associated with crisis, with coming crises, internal and external, and with some tremendous but, for the most part, vaguely defined breakthrough. Clearly, it is a period which exerts its fascinations. Some writers look back to the three or four decades before 1914 in order to determine the disintegration of particular human values. Other writers look back to this period in an attempt to contrast some of the brave new directions taken by modern society. Some reflect nostalgically on this period. Others welcome man's release from what are considered its archaic ways. Such interest is possibly symptomatic of this generation's own state of soul and attitude of mind, as well as its quest for identity or for self-understanding or for a better comprehension of its roots, or its uprootedness.

Focusing on "transformations in British literary culture" from the death of Thomas

Carlyle to World War I, this study contemplates not merely defilement in the broadest cultural framework but, more particularly, the despair that ravaged "man's imaginative orientation to the world" at a time when "old bases of significant imaginative life were indefensible." The author states his purpose as "an attempt to describe the bewilderment and to define the critical challenge which confronted the imagination in this period [1880-1914], and to trace the most characteristic responses which that crisis provoked." It is hardly necessary to say that this is not an original work. The book's over-dependence on secondary sources, in an endless stream of quotations and footnotes, testifies forcefully to this fact. In this respect, it is also hardly necessary to note that, for the student, no better understanding of the cultural character of this age can begin than with a reading of representative primary sources, in all genres, reflecting the response of the imagination to the significant happenings of this period. Having made these criticisms, I should state that in the main this book, as a synthesis in the area of the history of ideas (and thus it makes no pretensions at literary criticism), is characterized by probing and suggestive discussion. And it is one of its values that it tempts us to return to and examine the writers whose works illustrate the author's thesis—for example, Joseph Conrad, George Gissing, Richard Jefferies, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Walter Pater, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde.

Such is the excellence of its organization that the book can be conveniently summarized as the following. Part I, "The Challenge," delineates the drift toward disillusionment as found in the unrest pervading man's material life, thought, and imagination. The whole of this period is called "transitional," with "the transit not yet completed," in so far as its doubts and moods still remain. In further outlining the nature of the challenge posed by "the new cosmology," the author emphasizes the problems caused by Darwinism, with the

resultant need for man to learn how "to survive in a wilderness of choice and change."

Part II, "Responses in Three Modes," attempts to show some responses to the challenge as revealed in the emotions, in the mind, and in the imagination. Emotionally, there developed a pessimism caused by "the death of God" and the banishment of certitudes and of hope of any providential directing intelligence. Such tendencies as the glorification of the "eternal Nowness" and of a return to nature were offshoots of this emotional crisis. Mentally, attempts to discover other faculties of cognition emerged, at times in paradoxical ways—on the one hand, the empirical investigation of facts and a rational study of their consequences; on the other, the quests for non-logical faculties of cognition, such as a recognition of the powers of the unconscious and of the instinctive forces (even extending to a fascination with psychical research and occultism). Imaginatively, "the rage for art" became apparent chiefly as a means of escape from despair and as the only note of promise heard in a broken world: "Art became the antithesis and the antagonist of nature and science, of abstraction and intellection." A quotation from William Butler Yeats underscores the author's judgment: "The arts are . . . about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essences of things, and not with things."

Part III, "Applications," considers three themes (a propensity for triptych in this book is not coincidental, I suspect) in the literature of the period—the mask, ecstasy, and the will to believe. Some writers, like Wilde and Yeats, employed the mask to de-personalize the work of art. This mask served "as protective shell to a wounded sensibility," "as a projective concept of the varieties and heights of being which man might achieve," "as an aesthetic means of striking an aesthetic attitude, calm, serene, and outside the flux of time." The longing

for ecstatic experience was revealed in D. H. Lawrence's ecstasy in *eros*, in Jefferies's ecstasy in nature, in Joyce's ecstasy in the epiphany. This ecstasy became "an end in itself, a justifying reward in a world in which rewards were few." Ultimately, what we find in this period, according to the concluding chapter, is that in the midst of the collapse of absolutes it still remained man's task to "find or fabricate illusions and believe in them," in short, to affirm that "man must be and must find significance in being." Here, Conrad's work and thought are cited as exemplifying how the imagination can respond to the challenge of the "crisis of despair." "The human heart," as Conrad wrote in *Lord Jim*, and with which words the book ends, "is vast enough to contain all the world. It is valiant enough to bear the burden."

Generally, the author's conclusions are bound to elicit agreement. Some cultural historians, in fact, see the 1914-1918 War as the consummate result of exactly that cultural debilitation which the author traces in the literary and ideational areas of British culture in the period appraised. Nevertheless, the book leaves the impression that an entire period of cultural history is somehow bent, intimidated, pressured to accommodate an academic thesis. The findings are somehow too one-sided, too overworked in the portrayal of despair, in spite of the reassurance afforded by the author's inclusion of this epigraph, taken from Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mouches*: ". . . la vie humaine commence de l'autre côté du désespoir." And I must quibble with the title of the book. For if this was a period when despair seemed overwhelming, it was also a period of quiet contentment. In England, as Virginia Woolf asserts in her brilliant essay "The Leaning Tower," many writers still enjoyed "the advantages of the tower class," when reading, listening, discussing aesthetic emotions, and travelling, as well as leisure and tranquility, were luxuries of life not yet destroyed by a war that, in 1914, came crash "like a chasm in the smooth road." This book is

curiously deficient in its awareness of a settled civilization and even of a rural-pastoral *ethos* that still distinguished British life in 1880-1914.

What I am complaining about is that a more balanced outlook is needed if this period is to be rightly understood. The author would do well to re-examine the works of some of the selfsame writers he enlists for support—E. M. Forster and D. H. Lawrence, for instance. Could we, in fact, not declare that in a novel like *The Longest Journey* (1907) Forster in effect sanctions a way of life that *Journey Through Despair* equates with *angst*? And is it not significant that Forster himself has admitted that he stopped writing novels because the world after the Great War had drastically changed from the old-fashioned Edwardian world which he knew, "with its homes and its family life and its comparative peace?" And if we want evidence from one who did not belong to "the tower class," if, that is, we want a writer of the working class, then we can turn to Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow* (1915). No novel better illustrates the point I am raising here: Despair was not the all-consuming driving force that this book makes it out to be. The first part of this novel is in itself a pastoral hymn to an older and happier generation that lives on Marsh Farm, with its seasonal rhythm of life, its beauties, its peace and orderliness. Nor is it insignificant that in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), for all its grotesque immaturities, its misjudgments in taste, as well as its insolence, Lawrence yearns for the Eden of the English Midlands, not yet transformed into the amorphous industrial world that London came to symbolize. If an American spectator to the English scene in question is also needed, for the sake of further confirmation, there is George Santayana, whose *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* (1922), written in England during 1914-1918, begins by memorializing not a world of despair but a world of "contentment in solitude, fair outward ways, manly perfection and simplicity": a world in which "Cata-

clysms are rare"—or were rare until that "monstrous August" of 1914.

"This work belongs among seminal works in the nineteenth-century history of ideas." So writes Professor E. D. H. Johnson on the flyleaf of this book. However, a work that neglects to consider the cultural dimension I have been referring to has no right to be called seminal. But, as I said earlier, this book is useful in returning us to the sources, there to judge for ourselves matters that might otherwise be oversimplified and generalized, as they tend to be in this volume. To test (and correct) even more the thesis of this book, I turned to the late Stephan Zweig's (1881-1942) autobiography, *The World of Yesterday* (1943). Perhaps its most vivid pages are those that Zweig devotes to evoking the idyll of the European way of life before 1914. He speaks of this period as "the Golden Age of Security," when life had its fixed portions of value, when wars and revolutions were given little thought, when radicalism and violence were kept in check, when the private life was still protected from collectivist and bureaucratic practices, the oppressiveness of which we all know only too well these days. "It was an ordered world with definite classes and calm transitions, a world without haste," writes Zweig. This has been the judgment of major British writers themselves, including Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden, Leonard Woolf, and the late Siegfried Sassoon, whose writings, both prose and poetry, give us a decidedly different picture from that of *Journey Through Despair*. Indeed, when we stop to think of some of the survivors of this period—Bertrand Russell at 96, E. M. Forster at 90, Leonard Woolf at 88, Esmé Wingfield-Stratford at 86, Sir Compton Mackenzie at 86, R. H. Mottram at 85, Sir Geoffrey Keynes at 81—it is difficult to reconcile the hardiness and, not least, the mental haleness of these men with the conditions of despair which this book charts, often with grim and humorless academic passion.

Reviewed by GEORGE A. PANICHAS