

the facsimile edition of the original manuscript with Pound's cuts and rearrangements was not available when that judgment was offered—I doubt whether he would have made such a statement. Eliot himself took quite a different view of Pound's editing. In 1938, explaining the dedication of his first volume of collected poetry to Pound—*miglior fabbro*, as he called him—Eliot wrote:

I wished at that moment to honor the technical mastery and critical ability . . . which had . . . done so much to turn *The Waste Land* from a jumble of good and bad passages into a poem.

If the publisher of several of Mr. Kirk's earlier books may venture to say so, some judicious editing might have been in order for the present work. I for one would have suggested various deletions, of which the following is an example:

Others, your servant [*i. e.* Russell Kirk] among them, have kept their metaphysics warm even in the company of Cupid and Campaspe.

But this criticism is of no great moment. Mr. Kirk has written a book which tells us much not only about T. S. Eliot and the time in which he lived, but because it is also our time, much about ourselves as well. May I suggest, however, that just as Eliot's poetry admits of several interpretations, his life too may be explained differently by different persons. Mr. Kirk is of the opinion that had it not been for Eliot's unhappy first marriage, he would probably have gone back to the United States and contented himself with a Harvard professorship and a few scholarly books on the order of his doctoral thesis. Another, and to me more plausible explanation, would have it that Eliot was well aware of his creative gifts, and that his first marriage, unhappy as it may have been, was a necessary expression of his determination to assert himself, to live his own life independently of the demands and claims of his family. His second wife has said that he "dreaded" the

prospect of a return to Harvard, but it was no doubt not alone Harvard that he dreaded, but all that it would have meant in the sacrifice of his creative gift. Whether Eliot wrote great poetry future generations will have to decide—is it possible, one may ask, in this age of disintegration and dissolution to write great poetry at all? But in his ability to capture in his poetry the essential nature of his time and in his own life to rise above it, there can be no doubt that Eliot was a towering figure.

There are many books on T. S. Eliot and there will be many more, but it seems safe to say that few critics, if any, will better grasp the wholeness and significance of his work than Russell Kirk has done. Kirk makes a convincing case for his assertion that Eliot's primary concern was to apprehend "right order in the soul and right order in the commonwealth," and in so doing showed us the way whereby "the time may be redeemed."

---

## *Testaments to Devotion*

### **Memoirs of an Aesthete 1939-1969,**

by Harold Acton, *New York: The Viking Press, 1971. xv + 388 pp. \$8.95.*

### **Carrington: Letters and Extracts from**

**her Diaries**, chosen and with an Introduction by David Garnett, *New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971. 514 pp. \$12.50.*

## I

DEVOTION is a virtue that in both theory and practice frequently absents itself from the contemporary situation. Devotion to family, or to friends, or to country, or to God, or to work, or to excellence has been replaced by mean tendencies, by the fanati-

cal and sometimes by the fantastic. Current life-styles, it seems, leave little room for devotion; and the media, it is very clear, praise everything that in the end deprecates devotion. There is no time and little use for a quality of character, indeed of civilization, that encourages reverence for and allegiance to something greater than one's own self. If devotion is not a forgotten word, it is certainly an abused one. In an age of extremes it is a word that has been much defiled by those who preach its necessity while never practicing it and misused by those who embrace it while searching "after strange gods."

As both a word and a concept devotion needs to be rehabilitated, so that it may again become part of life as a civilizing force and perspective. The two books under discussion here remind us of the power of devotion. Although we may not see it among ourselves, we may see it at least in the lives of men and women whose writings recreate it. Devotion, as Homer and Virgil show, is an exceptional quality given to exceptional people. In fact the survival of civilization itself owes something to this exceptionalness. One has to be tough and patient and uncompromising in one's devotion to what transcends the mediocre and the transient. In these two books we view devotion from different but interacting sides, the detached and intelligent in *Memoirs of an Aesthete* 1939-1969 and the personal and passional in *Carrington*. And in each book we see an act of consecration by two singularly dissimilar people. The degree of dedication to something or to someone else discloses great strength of purpose, selflessness, and sacrifice that in turn have some lessons for all of us. In a slipshod age these lessons are urgent.

Harold Acton, poet, novelist, and historian, is devoted to beauty. In his *Memoirs of an Aesthete* published in 1948 and "written in self-defense," he states his creed in these words:

. . . I love beauty. For me beauty is the vital principle pervading the universe

—glistening in stars, glowing in flowers, moving with clouds, flowing with water, permeating nature and mankind. By contemplating the myriad manifestations of this vital principle we expand into something greater than we were born. Art is the mirror that reflects these expansions, sometimes for a moment, sometimes for perpetuity.

Belonging to the branch of the Acton family that produced the great historical thinker, he was born of an English father and an American mother at Villa La Pietra in Florence, and he lives there today amid the art treasures collected by his father and amid magnificent gardens. In his volume dealing with events up to 1939, Mr. Acton describes his education at Eton and at Oxford in the mid-1920's. He tells of his travels and of his experiences as a "citizen of the world" (his description of himself) in Switzerland, France, Java, Bali, Cambodia, Africa, and particularly Peking, where he lived for eight years and taught English literature at Pei Ta, the Peking National University. His devotion to universal culture can be explained, of course, on the basis of his origin, his education, his travels, his surroundings.

Mr. Acton's devotion to the writer's craft, it should be noted, is no less than his devotion to beauty. He is a fine stylist, and his writings are filled with exemplary passages, of which the following account of Gertrude Stein's delivering her famous lecture "Composition As Explanation" (1926) to an Oxford audience is representative:

Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell accompanied Gertrude as well as Miss Alice Toklas, her inseparable companion, who looked like a Spanish gypsy and talked like a Bostonian. Gertrude had left all her nervousness at Cambridge: it was a fine summer day and she was ready to enjoy herself. . . . Owing to the critics, the popular conception of Gertrude Stein was of an eccentric visionary, a literary Madame Blavatsky in fabulous clothes, the triumph of the

dream and escape from life personified, with bells on her fingers as well as on her toes, or a mermaid swathed in tinsel, smoking drugged cigarettes through an exaggerated cigarette holder, or a Gioconda who had her face lifted so often that it was fixed in a smile beyond the nightmare of Leonardo da Vinci. One was aware of the rapid deflation of these conceptions, as Gertrude surpassed them by her appearance, a squat Aztec figure in obsidian, growing more monumental as soon as she sat down. With her tall bodyguard of Sitwells and the gipsy acolyte, she made a memorable entry.

This second volume continues Mr. Acton's memoirs from 1939, "which seemed the end of an era when many Englishmen 'thought imperially.' After a prelude of ominous calm another dance of death began that autumn." In spite of the barbarism of this period, the fervor of Mr. Acton's devotion to beauty remains undiminished. The tone of his comments regarding others is less peevish than in the first volume, though Somerset Maugham is seen as the least likeable among his close friends, who include Arthur Waley, Lady Cunard, Cecil Beaton, Norman Douglas, Evelyn Waugh, and Bernard Berenson. Especially of Berenson there are some fascinating vignettes. A neighbor in Florence, Berenson is singled out for praise as "a humanistic sage" and "an illuminating beacon in my existence." Portraits of other friends and acquaintances—Picasso, Benedetto Croce, George Orwell, Jean Cocteau, Sinclair Lewis, among others—are also interesting. Throughout Mr. Acton is a perceptive human observer with an essentially aesthetic response to the scene. "Memoirs should concentrate on all that is vital," he insists, "and attempt to recapture the hours and moments of exaltation and delight, the friendships, colours, emotions that have intensified an existence and magnified it for the time being." "For me art is the highest truth and I have always lived more intensely through works of art. And art is silenced by mechanized modern warfare."

Such comments define the nature of Mr. Acton's devotion as well as the reasons why the cataclysmic events of history since 1939 are subordinated to the matters that instinctively matter most to Mr. Acton—his family and friends, his literary inclinations, his aesthetic pursuits and possessions, his Florentine villa:

. . . I believe, like *Candide*, that we ought to cultivate our garden. I consider myself lucky to have a garden to cultivate. I am aware that I am privileged, that I belong to a vanished period: entangled in the past as I am, I have no desire to belong to any other—unless it was the middle of the eighteenth century. In the constant flux of those fashions and systems which the impotent try to foist on us I have kept my independence: I have not attempted to force fresh flowers from the modish manure and twist myself into the latest trendy postures. We must be true to our own vision of this world. My own vision has been enhanced but also circumscribed by *La Pietra*.

Here, then, Mr. Acton discloses inevitably the limitations of his devotion. He is no social theorist, no moralist. He is content to stay within a realm of devotion that he knows intimately and loves, a fact that explains why, for example, the war years and his own wartime service in the RAF lack centrality. Besides its savagery, barbarism has its inconveniences. If Mr. Acton is repelled by the savagery of the modern world, he is all too understandably horrified by its ugliness, particularly the ugliness of contemporary American society, as expressed in this passage:

Much as I appreciated American dynamism, I felt at a loose end among the Titans of American technology. Unduly susceptible to physical surroundings, I was horrified by the implications as well as the sheer ugliness of a sprawling city like Los Angeles, which seemed to be made for machines rather than for men.

The implications were of spiritual and cultural starvation. Engineers were replacing architects, and new jungles of metal and concrete would continue to devour the world's surface, a nightmare prospect. Viewed from above, New York was a strident symphony of soaring towers, but from the street the effect was generally impersonal and drab: the very skyscrapers seemed vacant-minded when I compared them to the buildings of Florence, the miracle of Venice, the magnificence of Rome, the voluptuousness of Naples, and countless other Italian cities comparatively small but noble in conception, the harmonious creations of individual genius.

## II

IN HAROLD ACTON'S memoirs devotion merges with a transcendent experience of beauty. In Dora Carrington's diaries and letters ("surely the best letters to have been published in English in this century," according to one critic), devotion is an immanent part of the complex experience of love. The object of her love was Lytton Strachey, "great anarchist" (as Cyril Connolly called him) and author, whom she met in 1915 and with whom she lived, first at The Mill House, Tidmarsh, and later at Ham Spray House, Hungerford. They were lovers, David Garnett tells us in his Preface, but physical love between them was not possible: Strachey was a homosexual and Carrington (the name by which she was always called) was a bisexual who harbored an intense dislike of her femininity. In any event, her devotion to Strachey held steadfast until his death on January 21, 1932. Less than two months later she committed suicide for she was unable to bear the loss of the man to whom she had dedicated her life.

Carrington's devotion to Strachey remained as unique as did their *ménage*. In 1922 she married Ralph Partridge, whom Strachey loved, and later she fell in love with Gerald Brenan. In 1926 Partridge fell

in love with Frances Marshall, whom he married in 1933. But no matter what happened, Strachey, Carrington, and Partridge maintained to the end a "trinity of happiness" to which others were admitted as time and conditions or as temptation and opportunities allowed. This was in every way a Bloomsbury kind of situation in the 1920's, a "golden age" that, as Lord Annan has said, "reaffirmed the romantic principle of diversity."

Whatever the moral implications of such relationships, Carrington was always an enigmatic character who attracted, among many others, Aldous Huxley. In his letters Huxley describes her as "enchanting"; and in his novel *Crome Yellow* (1922) he depicts her in the person of Mary Bracegirdle, the "moonlike innocence" of whose "face shone pink and childish. . . . Her short hair, clipped like a page's, hung in a bell of elastic gold about her cheeks. She had large blue china eyes, whose expression was one of ingenuous and often puzzled earnestness." Other critics were, to be sure, less impressed by Carrington, seeing in her symptoms of a *malaise* in the years between the two world wars—a *malaise* synonymous with the Bloomsbury ethos. Of these critics Dr. F. R. Leavis is the most commanding and acerbic in his indictment of the values of the Bloomsbury social-intellectual milieu. Moral debilitation, snobism, aesthetic flabbiness, inanition, irreverence: these are traits that critics of Bloomsbury have attacked. Indeed, no less a figure than Bertrand Russell has written in his *Autobiography* (vol. I):

The generation of [John Maynard] Keynes and Lytton [Strachey] . . . aimed . . . at a life of retirement among shades and nice feelings, and conceived of the good as consisting in the passionate admiration of the élite.

Moralists and puritans alike will share Russell's qualms in reading Carrington's letters and diaries. For the deficiencies of Bloomsbury are unmistakably *there* in the world that Carrington reveals.

But these deficiencies have been by now well enough publicized and their consequences well enough assessed. It would be wrong to dismiss the positive aspects of the Bloomsbury ethos: love of literature and the arts, respect for the inner life, passion for beauty, loyalty to friends. What Lytton Strachey's circle demonstrated was the need in the post-1918 "weed world" (as Wyndham Lewis described it) for hanging on to something of value. Such a goal was difficult in a period in which, as Leonard Woolf believed, barbarism was ascendant. "The last moment of the greenwood," to quote E. M. Forster, had vanished. Against this background the relationship between Carrington and Strachey needs to be viewed, at least in part. Some life-value, in a word, needed to be grasped, if only to lessen the blows inflicted by history.

The relationship between Carrington and Strachey instances not only this need but also a profound psychological anomaly in each of two talented friends seeking a normalizing process. In Carrington a devotion to Strachey had to take the place of the more consummate emotions that lead to a career or to family and children or to other stabilized pleasures and advantages. "All these years," she writes to Strachey in one of her most moving letters, "I have known all along that my life with you was limited. I could never hope for it to become permanent." She adds in a post-script: "I only cried last night at realising I never could have my Moon, that some times I must pain you, and often bore you." No less moving nor revealing is Strachey's reply, a reply that helps to rebut the charge that Strachey was never "wholly serious":

. . . You *do* know very well that I love you as something more than a friend, you angelic creature, whose goodness to me has made me happy for years, and whose presence in my life has been, and always will be, one of the most important things in it. . . . Remember that I too have never had my moon! We are all helpless in these things—dreadfully

helpless. I am lonely and I am all too truly growing old, and if there is a chance that your decision meant that I should somehow or other lose you, I don't think I could bear it.

These letters show simultaneously the paradoxes that assail life. Carrington's correspondence in 1926 with Frances Marshall, pleading with the latter not to bring an end to the relations of Strachey, Ralph Partridge, and herself, gives a clue to great emotional complications:

I . . . beg you to try [Carrington pleads], while these adjustments are being made, to see the position from my point of view and to try and see if it's not compatible with your happiness to still let me keep some of my friendship with Ralph. I can't get away from everything, because of Lytton. Even although the happiness of my relation with Lytton, ironically, is so bound up with Ralph, that that will be wrecked. I am obliged to accept this situation; you must see that. . . . You see, Frances, you can afford to be lenient because R[alph] is so completely yours in his affections. In spite of all your difficulties and unhappiness you are a gainer, we losers. And if you face it, the situation really is that *Ralph can only give me what you can spare to give.*

Frances Marshall's reply to Carrington is generous in its humanity and in its recognition of "this horrible knot in which our happinesses have got involved":

Because I love R. and want to live with him, and want him to share my life instead of being a visitor into it—I can't see how I could find this incompatible with his being fond of you and seeing you every day of his life.

The *ménage* at Ham Spray thus remained intact—at least on weekends. During the rest of the week Frances Marshall and Partridge lived together in London.

One cannot help admiring the tenacity of Carrington's devotion. It was a quality

to salvage life from the destructive process. in its absurdest forms and that also helped to salvage life from the destructive process. The relationship between Carrington and Strachey must not be lamented because of its barrenness. Given the special circumstances of each person, their physical and emotional disturbances, it was a relationship that not only crystallized the saving powers of devotion (beyond the mere fulfillment of common needs) but also brought into their lives an element of grace: a certain emotional security based upon the bonds of loyalty and friendship. Above all, Carrington's devotion provided for a modicum of happiness and harmony in a world in which such states are often elusive. It no doubt helped to alleviate frustration and desperation. For Strachey and Carrington devotion was the vehicle of mercy, and in this there was something Dostoevskian in their relations. (It was not for nothing that Strachey admired the novels of the great Russian novelist. Dostoevsky would have *understood* the relationship between Carrington and Strachey.)

The selections from Carrington's letters and diaries concerning Strachey's death and her consequent despair are filled with pathos. Her devotion to him had enabled her to endure everything except his death. An ultimate test of devotion, when irreparable personal loss occurs, is acceptance and patience, a "waiting for God." But Carrington could not endure the void, as this passage in her diaries shows:

Nothing inside me felt the same. Ralph brought me some bay leaves, and I made a wreath. I tried it on my head, it was a little large. I went in and put it around Lytton's head. He looked so beautiful. The olive green leaves against his ivory skin. I kissed his eyes and his ice cold lips. The sun shone through the open window. . . . I asked . . . if I could go in again to Lytton. . . . and then I went in for the last time and kissed his lips, and his forehead and the tears dropped from my eyes on his face.—

Her own end, only weeks later, was "in-describably sad," to quote Gerald Brenan. Neither Voltaire nor Hume, the all too human gods of Strachey and of Bloomsbury, could possibly ease her burden of grief. Indeed, she confessed that she could not refute Hume's *Essay on Suicide*, which she now reread. At one time Strachey had read it to her, she recalled, and "both agreed on the sense and truth of the arguments." On March 11, 1932, she shot herself. When Virginia Woolf heard of her friend Carrington's death, she felt "terror at night of things generally wrong in the universe" and "saw all the violence and unreason crossing in the air: ourselves small; a tumult outside; something terrifying: unreason."

Reviewed by GEORGE A. PANICHAS

---

### *Her Sacred Office*

**The Complete Stories**, by Flannery O'Connor, *New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971. 555 pp. \$10.00.*

NO AMERICAN WRITER of fiction ever had a grander view of his high calling than Henry James: he referred to it as a sacred office. And the term may be used, in more senses than one, to characterize the works of Flannery O'Connor—her actual fictional achievement and her attitude toward that endeavor. Now, less than eight years after her untimely death in 1964, at the age of thirty-nine, she is no less a phenomenon in the recognition that continues to be accorded her and the increasing attention given to her work. Already there are four full-length studies of her work in print, besides two pamphlets and several hundred articles and reviews and also a score of theses and dissertations. And in the most recent annual bibliography of critical and scholarly work done on Southern writers (compiled