

Windows on the Waste Land

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The Reverent Discipline: Essays in Literary Criticism and Culture, by George A. Panichas, with a foreword by G. Wilson Knight, *Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1974. xxvi + 462 pp. \$16.95.*

I

HILAIRE BELLOC in a sardonic moment spoke of literary criticism as "writing squared"; it is writing-about-writing, or "writing to the second power." Belloc said he had even heard of "a third degree of horror: writing about what other people have written about writing! . . . Good Lord, deliver us!"¹ The truth of course is that for a good many centuries after Longinus—or whoever it was that wrote the famous treatise ascribed to him—European literature got along well enough without benefit of critics; indeed two or three of the greatest names belong to this period of critical silence. The change came with the Renaissance and the invention of printing, but even then it was mainly technical and more often addressed to the writer than to the general reader. It was not until the nine-

teenth century that Matthew Arnold could set himself up as a kind of honest broker between the world treasury of literature and the educated readers of his day and could define his mission as "a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world," and in the process elevating criticism itself to the rank of literature.

In these essays Professor Panichas adds a fourth dimension to the function of the critic. It is to show why a knowledge of what others have been thinking and writing is now necessary to an understanding of the world and the times we are fated to inhabit. What we call modern literature is not to be considered merely a reflection of the time-spirit and of the prevailing moral climate; it is rather to a very large degree the primary source of the *Zeitgeist* and the contemporary ethos—there is nothing either good or bad in what we now behold but thinking and writing have made it so! The poets, novelists, dramatists, and philosophers—and among these last we may include Darwin, Marx, and Freud—have reshaped the world and its inhabitants in terms of their own vision. There is very little that the scientists, technologists, engineers, journalists, demagogues and revolutionaries

have made of our world that writers had not already imagined for it. It is no longer possible, the professor believes, for the writer to stand aloof, as M. Julien Benda would have had him do, from the passions and turmoils of his age and devote himself to contemplation of the enduring virtues and verities. We have come, the professor tells us,

to rely a great deal on the writer to help us understand a world in the midst of ideological turmoil and cultural fragmentation. To him we have turned for the help we seem unable to get from the traditional sources of state, school and church. . . . It is the writer in his "meditation on history" who can achieve metapolitical objectivity and can even be (in the extreme Marxist view) "an engineer of human souls" When Simone Weil, that most passionate Platonist of modern philosophers, asserts, "I believe in the responsibility of the writers of recent years for the disasters of our time," she helps to define, despite the perverseness of her contention, the magnified power of the writer in the modern world. . . .

II

WRITERS TO BE SURE have always exercised a considerable power over minds and events, even in ages far distant from their own and in places they had never heard of. "In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," wrote the French critic, Denis Saurat, "people actually read Plutarch and Horace to amuse themselves."² These readers constituted a small intellectual elite, numbering at most no more than a few thousand, and were products of a rigorous educational system which placed great value on the wisdom of antiquity; yet one has only to read the speeches and writings of the revolutionary enthusiasts of the First Republic to perceive how greatly the reading of Plutarch had influenced their postures, ideas, and fantasies, and in some

cases even their adopted names—e.g., Anacharsis Cloots, Gracchus Babeuf. What has changed the whole relationship of writer and society, and thereby the prevalent patterns of literature, has been the growth of mass literacy and the increase of leisure among all social classes. This has been accompanied by a decline of what M. Saurat has called the *genres nobles*, notably poetry and poetic drama, and by the rise of the novel as the dominant literary form. Poetry to be sure is still being written and published, but it has become increasingly solipsistic, that is to say with the poet writing primarily for himself while remaining for the most part incomprehensible to others. It is significant that the only modern poet whose work is examined at much length in this book is T. S. Eliot, though Professor Panichas considers *The Waste Land*, with its allegory of an age and a society sterilized by liberalism, vulgarity, and the loss of religious tradition, to have been the most important single production of the century; the others that he finds worthy of extended treatment—novelists like Dostoevsky and D. H. Lawrence, critics like F. R. Leavis and Wilson Knight, religious thinkers like Simone Weil—are wholly or for the most part workers in prose. Mr. Knight in his foreword to this book implies that *The Waste Land* owes something of its great influence and prestige to its timing, as well as to the editorial labors of Ezra Pound. The poem made its appearance just when it had become evident that the traditional English culture, along with so much else of Western civilization, had been swept away in the bloody cataclysms of the First World War and its terrible legacies of revolution. He sees the subsequent history of the century as a fulfillment of Alexander Pope's prophetic lines:

Religion blushing veils her sacred fires
And unaware Morality expires. . . .
Lo, thy dread empire, Chaos, is restored.
Light dies before thy uncreating word.³

Certainly, the years 1914-18 mark one of the great divides of history, as Professor

Panichas shows in one of his finest essays, reproduced here from the introduction to his book, *Promise of Greatness*. Today, barely two generations after the fateful shots were fired at Sarajevo, we are far closer in mood and temper to the disintegrating Roman world of fifteen hundred years ago than to the Edwardian twilight of the British *imperium* with its elegance, gaiety, and light hearted snobberies, as our author reconstructs them from such sources as the memoirs and diaries of Lady Cynthia Asquith. Lost in that "monstrous August" of 1914 and never to be recovered

was the leisurely world of European society . . . when education was centered in the classics, when cricket and the hunt were often more important than foreign affairs, when private life was valued, when writing poetry and exploring the countryside were sources of quiet joy—a world still close to Thomas Hardy's "indispensable conditions of existence [which] are attachment to the soil of one particular spot by generation after generation". . . .

III

How STRANGE and pitiful today seems the romantic, almost carnival spirit in which the nations entered upon that war!

Even as it caused incredulity, disarray and anguish, the declaration of war awakened dreams of glorious exploits. . . . [Soon, however, these] dreams of cavalry charges, of open warfare with dashing officers leading professional soldiers into the fray, into a struggle of strength, skill, and courage, had to give way, at tremendous expense of lives and material, to the grim exigencies of a fighting front thick with barbed wire and gashed with trenches. This was the new war in a new age. It was a total, an absolute war. . . . It was a struggle directed against men as objects. As such, this war was to be a portent of an age progressively sacrificing the personal to

the needs of a machine-made mass civilization.

By some of the combatants the war was waged in a spirit "bordering on a religious frenzy." For others, however, the war became the means of a religious awakening. It put an end to the comforting illusions, engendered in the Enlightenment, of illimitable progress and the ultimate perfection of mankind, and demonstrated instead that

evil in the world is not rooted merely in human oppression, but is an intrinsic part of the nature of things. . . . The nightmare of slaughter and wooden crosses that the Great War became—these were the facts that unmasked the demonic character of man who had sinned and fallen. Life at the front was thus the furthest extension of man's essential condition: his weakness and imperfectibility strained to their most extreme limits. . . .

Professor Panichas' work is informed throughout by an abiding awareness of the power and mystery of evil; so in their various ways is the work of most of the writers with whom he is chiefly concerned, among them Dostoevsky, Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Pasternak, and the saintly French blue-stocking, Simone Weil. The professor identifies himself as a Christian humanist and shows himself to be widely read in theology; indeed two of the essays here republished appeared originally in theological journals. In his index one finds the names of sixteen saints from the Orthodox and Roman calendars. To St. Tikon Zadonsky, who provided Dostoevsky with one of the models for the character of Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dr. Panichas devotes a special attention. There are passing references to—or citations from—a vast variety of religious thinkers, including Clement, Origen, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Pascal, Newman, Soloviev, Berdyaev, Buber, Tillich, Gilson, Maritain, Merton, and Teilhard de Chardin. Philo-

sophic names are even more abundant: Thales, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, Philo, Plotinus, William of Occam, Descartes, Hume, Locke, Royce, Bergson, Santayana, Heidegger, Jaspers, Russell. The full index of names, titles, and subjects covers twenty pages and is in itself an impressive, though unintended, indication of the author's erudition. After glancing through it one feels that Dr. Panichas too, if he wished, would be entitled to boast that

. . . Though that I can but lyte
On bokes for me to rede, I me delyte.

. . .
And in myn herte have hem in reverence.⁴

His title and method, however, were suggested to him not by Chaucer but by a dictum of D. H. Lawrence, who insisted that a good book should be approached in the attitude with which one participates "in a divine service," and that the critic's duty, like that of a good beadle, "is to rap the public on the knuckles and make it attend"; but the professor's interpretation of his rôle seems to be not so much that of the beadle as of the devout officiant. A work of literature, he tells us, should be approached in a spirit of

deep respect, humility, honor and meditation—meditation above all—in the presence of otherness.

Of course the professor does not, like Rilke and some others, see in art, literature and the aesthetic life generally, a substitute for religion in a world from which God has been banished; it is rather that he believes the proper office of the critic to be inseparable from religion, since only religion can provide those absolutes from which all meaning and all judgments of value must derive. He seems to have in mind something akin to the Thomistic "argument from grades of perfection," though the chief witnesses on whom he calls to support his demand for the return of standards and discipline, not only in literature and

criticism but in education and in cultural and intellectual life generally, are moderns like Lawrence, Eliot, and F. R. Leavis. We are now, he tells us,

in the midst of a battle to maintain and promulgate civilized standards in opposition to the drift toward barbarism, a drift that has accelerated in the modern world. . . . Literary criticism in the light of what I call a reverent discipline implies a recovery of values and directions. This recovery means a consequent (re)awareness of the Judeo-Christian tradition as the background of our civilization. . . . That the critical spirit cannot be divorced from a clear-cut scale of moral values and from religious roots is at the origin of the critical thrust of this book. . . .

IV

IN AN ILLUMINATING chapter Dr. Panichas explores the relationship of metaphysics to literature and to art in general, and in doing so uncovers a significant paradox. Whereas metaphysics—the word in modern usage is commonly singular—is now in much disrepute among many, perhaps most philosophers, and is rejected even by some theologians who have adapted the Gospel to the prevailing ethos and to purely secular concerns, metaphysics continues to preoccupy, consciously or unconsciously, most of the influential writers of our times, including, as our author shows, James Joyce, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Samuel Beckett. A kind of intuitive metaphysics provided the theoretical basis for the still fashionable cult of psychoanalysis, and the same might be said of the Marxist vision of historical evolution.⁵

By metaphysics we may understand the intellectual or the imaginative pursuit of ultimate reality into the supersensible realms of consciousness. The term may also include the effort to describe or discuss transcendent truths in languages formulated wholly out of sensible experiences, for

at the root of almost every abstract word lies some concrete image. Thus metaphysical language is necessarily symbolic and analogical, like that of mystics who sometimes seek to convey a spiritual experience in the vocabulary and imagery of sensual love. The translation of metaphysical symbols into an explicit and systematic arrangement constitutes a theology, something that apparently is necessary to the rise and survival of every high civilization. Systematic theology, as Dorothy Emmet, a pupil of the late A. N. Whitehead, has explained, removes the terror implicit in the notion of cosmic chaos and satisfies the human craving for intellectual security.

People like to feel they live in a "friendly universe" which makes sense; and the record of their theologies is largely (though not exclusively) a record of the intellectual houses they have built in order to come in out of the rain. But a house is also an indispensable means to civilized life. Within its shelter the arts and graces of life can grow and flourish and standards of behavior and sensibility are implicitly accepted. When . . . basic responses to life are assured and shared . . . civilized life can grow and be transmitted to the next generation. The part played by a theological tradition in building up a civilized community with standards of discrimination in manners and morals is easily recognized in these days when we are in present danger of seeing the latter disintegrate along with the former. So too we can recognize its civilizing rôle in sustaining certain fundamental ways of life which can provide constant themes and inspirations to artists, poets, and musicians. . . . The ages of metaphysical instability, when men are called to go out of their houses and cities, not knowing whither they go, are apt to be uncivilized ages. For civilization depends on form, on the achievement of some shape in personal and communal living.

. . .⁶

Professor Panichas cites an aphoristic saying by M. Gilson that the object of metaphysical inquiry is the problem "without which there would be no other problems," for the assertion of a problem postulates the need or the hope of a solution. Without metaphysics there can be no values or judgments of value—only data derived from endless weighings and measurements and mathematical calculations. "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so," and this is why metaphysics must be inseparable from the artistic imagination, whether the artist is an atheist like Sartre or a passionate Christian like Dostoevsky. Only a metaphysical vision can give meaning to the interior struggle, or *agon*, out of which imaginative literature is fashioned, An artist, says Panichas,

lives and creates in a state of crisis and in a condition of peril. He sees and expresses the semblances of the outer life, and he suffers the desperate secrets of the inner life. As a result of his metaphysical journeys and discoveries, his responsiveness to metaphysic crisis and metaphysic peril, his vision has an explosive clarity and miraculous power that is even theurgic in its reaches.

Sartre in his metaphysical exploration found that the God who once "spoke to us now is silent; all that we touch now is His corpse." For Sartre, therefore, "life has no meaning *a priori*," so it becomes the duty of the novelist to create a meaning for it and thereby give it value. Beckett, too, it seems, in his own metaphysical questing failed to find meaning, but unlike Sartre lacked the will or the power to create it; consequently, as Panichas tells us, Beckett sees man as a lost soul, as one who is

haunted by "an intolerable depravation" and "an irreparable absence." His is a desacralized world when, as Nietzsche would have it, the shadow of God, lurking in caves, has been conquered at last. Helplessness, worthlessness, meaninglessness, Beckett tells us, epitomize the con-

dition of man. "But what matter," we read in *Malone Dies*, "whether I was born or not, have lived or not, am dead or merely dying, I shall go on doing as I always have done, not knowing what it is I do, nor who I am nor where I am, nor if I am." . . . More than anything else, Beckett is a writer whose metaphysical search leads to the lowermost depths in his hopes of somehow finding "the fundamental reality which would remain, once what is accessory in man has been destroyed". . . .

As for Beckett's compatriot, Joyce, his metaphysical questing ends "in a call to the mystery of the priesthood—the priesthood of the artist." And for this self-chosen vocation Joyce appropriates by way of metaphysical analogy the concepts and sacramental terminologies of the religion he has foresworn.

. . . It is, Joyce contends, "in the virgin womb of imagination [that] the word was made flesh." His technique, an uncompromising vindication of this belief, is achieved by "a priest of eternal imagination" transmuted "the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life." His technique is continually colored on the one hand by an elemental religionism, a pious Catholicism to be exact, and on the other by a ferocious independence of creative effort. . . .

V

THIS IS NOT a book that can be read at a sitting, nor even at several successive sit-

tings, nor should it be. As books of criticism go nowadays, it is a very long one, and the publishers might have done better to have brought out separately each of the four sections into which it is divided. Here and there a reader may be startled, as apparently was Mr. G. Wilson Knight, by one of Professor Panichas' departures from the critical consensus. He finds for example the central character of Dostoevsky's novel *The Possessed*⁷ to be the aristocratic and enigmatic Prince Stavrogin and his case to be not so much one of demonic possession as one of utter satanism. This is at odds with the testimony of Dostoevsky's daughter that though her father may have originally intended Stavrogin as the hero, he came to realize Verhovensky [mentioned only in passing by the professor] was much the more interesting and decided that *he* must be the hero.

As is well known, the character of Verhovensky was suggested by that of S. G. Nechaev, sometime associate of Bakunin and real-life murderer of the student I. I. Ivanov, resurrected by Dostoevsky as the Chatov of the novel.⁸

All quibbles apart, however, these interpretive and highly instructive essays, several of which have appeared in *Modern Age*, deserve to be read carefully one by one, though it may be an effort of weeks or months. For they fully justify their author's claim that modern literature does provide the true key to the nature of our chaotic century, and the reading will also provoke that spirit of meditation that he asserts to be the most important element of the reverential mode.

¹*The Silence of the Sea and Other Essays* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1940).

²*Modern French Literature* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1946).

³*The Dunciad*, Book IV 653-56.

⁴Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*.

⁵The chain of suppositions grew rapidly in their [Marx's and Engels'] minds into a chain of definitive truths; the abstract philosophical speculations hardened into concrete economic

certainty. . . . Leopold Schwarzschild, *The Red Prussian: Life and Legend of Karl Marx*; translated by Margaret Wing (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947).

⁶*The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking* (London: Macmillan & Company, 1946).

⁷Panichas, for a reason not quite apparent, prefers to translate the title as "The Devils."

⁸Cf. *Firebrand, The Life of Dostoevsky*, by Henry Troyat (New York: Roy Publishers, 1946).