

## Commentary and Rejoinder

I HAVE READ Mr. John Tasker's review of Stephen Spender's book, *The Thirties and After*, in the Fall 1979 *Modern Age*, with some degree of consternation and amazement. What—I ask myself—is the purpose of this piece of impassioned rhetoric?—to chastise Mr. Spender publicly for previously rebuking Dr. F. R. Leavis, and—for good measure—to administer a few additional blows to various authorities which represent the British Establishment, who also sadly neglected to pay the learned Doctor the necessary reverence during his celebrated career as scourge of English Letters at the University of Cambridge?

I am no great admirer of Mr. Spender's writing (and, I admit, have not read the collection of essays in question). However, this kind of hysterical denunciation—by which I refer to the embarrassing piling of venom upon venom until a terrible effect of chaotic spleen is achieved, surely does no one any good:—neither the late Dr. Leavis, nor Mr. Tasker, nor, of course, poor Mr. Spender, who serves, I suppose, as the starting point for an object lesson in abuse. I would have thought that all this fire and thunder would have achieved the reverse of what Mr. Tasker intended: which is, I imagine, yet another agonized paean in praise of Dr. Leavis.

Mr. Tasker makes it appear that Stephen Spender was appointed Professor of English in the University of London for entirely bogus reasons. Would he, I wonder, have been a more eligible candidate (in Mr. Tasker's view) if he had entered in his curriculum vitae—“. . . have personally scrubbed kitchen floors over a considerable period of years”?

In retrospect, this review suggests that the whole of the British literary and academic world is based upon a kind of “old boy” conspiracy. I do not wish to seem an

advocate for the various institutions he mentions, but, even the most fanatic pundit would have to search his conscience at some point and admit that there might be an ounce of value residing somewhere in such a body. Mr. Tasker, in fact, has disregarded his own Messiah's stricture on criticism,—*i.e.*, that it should have some ultimate creative function. I can only conclude that Mr. Tasker's emotive parochialism is unfit for the pages of a balanced literary critical journal.

—MICHAEL R. BERDINNER

THE ODD AMBIVALENCE of Mr. Berdinner's letter in defense of an author whom he does not admire, and a book which he has not read, and an Establishment for which he “does not wish to seem an advocate,” is very striking. The slackness of thought is pervasive, “impassioned rhetoric,” for instance, so soon becoming “hysterical denunciation,” and it hardly occurs to him that the “abuse” with which he charges me ought not to be a characterizing feature of his own letter.

My reaction to Stephen Spender's book was not “hysterical.” It was one of controlled contempt for the subtly camouflaged humbug of the book. I examined, with specific examples, a familiar kind of success story in the world of letters whereby a great reputation is created on what seem to be baseless grounds. My point about Mr. Spender's being a professor of English Literature in the University of London was not to question his qualifications for the appointment (what were they?). It was that Mr. Spender's ironical comments on his past, offered as honest and open reappraisal, are easy and indulgent, and bring in the dividends. The past which he dismisses is no longer in favor and to deride it is fashionable. It is on Mr. Spender's present “self” that a degree of irony would be more appreciated and more honest, and that has been withheld, presumably for the posthumous autobiography.

Mr. Berdinner complains that my review has no "ultimate creative function." "Creative" in this view would be degraded to mean merely laudatory. Reviews such as mine, however critical, are an essential part of the process by which standards are established from comparison. The discriminating of the truly creative writers would become impossible if all authors were to be treated in the same laudatory way, the mediocre praised to the skies along with the great, and hard-hitting polemic, which has a sense of the perspective of these things, be condemned as "uncreative."

I think Mr. Berdinner will agree, when he re-reads his letter, that his references to Dr. F. R. Leavis, in their jocularly clanging vulgarity, are something to be ashamed of. They make nonsense of his claim to be concerned about the "creative

function." Dr. Leavis was not a "scourge of English Letters." He devoted his life to a sustained creative reevaluation of English literature for which we should all be profoundly grateful. Mr. Berdinner's sordid cracks—common currency among the Establishment—are self-disgracing. He "imagines" that the aim of my review was "yet another agonized paean in praise of Dr. Leavis." There's "creative" imagination for you! What are the other "agonized paeans" to which he is referring?

But I leave the reader to judge whether "hysterical denunciation," "venom," "chaotic spleen," "fire and thunder," and "emotive parochialism" more aptly describe my review or Mr. Berdinner's letter.

—JOHN TASKER