

Mr Osborne and an Indifferent Society

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ONE of the charges frequently urged against Mr. Osborne, urged by the older men, is that he has nothing to be angry about. Now the label Mr. Osborne has acquired, or rather the label that has been bestowed upon him by cultural public relations, is misleading. Certainly the anger is there, too much there in that wilfully strident piece in "Encounter," for example, but talk about "the young angries" is no more than a prophylactic against relevant discussion. The critic who uses the term is merely safeguarding his own meagre responses. Nevertheless it has to be accounted for in relation to Mr. Osborne's work so far.

Suppose one were required to typify our culture, to produce one brief judgment that had practical relevance. One might say, and I would certainly say; our culture is noteworthy because of its indifference to life, noteworthy in its will to achieve the minor, to possess trivial and immoral objects. One of the partially disabling experiences of sustained research into the 19th century is that one finds oneself beginning to inhabit that culture in default of a truly positive contemporary *milieu*. One's response to the contemporary scene becomes sharpened through familiar contact with the best of the Victorian mind, and one carries away a living sense of its fullness, of its conviction and of its respect for life. Thomas Arnold, the early Carlyle, Dickens, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, T. H. Green, Ruskin and Morris—we cannot equal the list. And one has to record not just that they were larger figures faced with a different range of problems, one has to enquire into their largeness, and to ask what gives them their amply affirming vitality. In comparison with the 20th century one may broadly distinguish their respect for their function, their capacity for finely moral experience, and their reverence for life. Human beings, their duties, their relationships and the possibilities for life open to them were the prime focus of concern, and a strenuous seriousness was for them a virtue, not an excuse for a snigger or one of Professor Oakeshott's articles. Nowadays an equivalent sensibility would be either abused or patronized, put firmly in its place by some self-appointed spokesman or other. One knows them. Angus Maude, one of the Burkes of the Suez crisis, writing on Parliament, Peregrine Worsthorne on equality, or how to fight a limited war, Jacquetta Hawkes on marriage, Priestley on the bomb, Lord Hailsham on England, Home and Beauty, J. G. Weightman on *Declaration!* Charles Curran on the working class, all sustained by a sort of adhesive cleverness, the easy substitute for affirmation. One is driven to the Dunciad to find an equivalent ensemble of decorative half-truths and shameful ineptitudes. It is surely only the reassuring fabric of Gower Street and Great Turnstile that prevents the appearance of an English Dwight Macdonald, and English "Responsibility of Peoples" and an English version of Good Samaritan politics. Mr. Macdonald, needless to say, is an American, but his wilful and original

integrity administers the most salutary moral shock. You do at least feel that what goes on in the world really matters to him, however perversely, and you rarely get that impression over here. Although to say "it is surely only the reassuring fabric, etc." is perhaps to say all that needs saying.

Intellectuals however are convenient Aunt Sallies. One needs to find out why they are where they are, inviting one to hurl something. Usually if some account is being offered for the moral recession that afflicts the intellectual world, the thirties are chosen as the ripely appropriate context for discussion. One hears that now there are no causes, and so our moral assets are necessarily frozen. And yet the thirties surely threw up a disembodied generation, in England at any rate, individuals without an achieved synthesis, without sustaining conviction, and who, in comparison with (say) Arthur Koestler, emerged from the whole dreadful process curiously unscathed, but who have since gone through the motions of large-scale disillusionment and have proffered their experience to us as something that actually matters. There are of course the obvious and valuable exceptions. Lawrence has his place here, T. F. Powys, Myers, Orwell and the Marxists who were brave enough and firm enough to sacrifice their lives in Spain. But the rest! What a bedraggled confederacy! It does Mr. Osborne no justice to talk about him in relation to that kind of intellectual. Mr. Osborne talks about causes, but his fundamental cause—the only cause that matters—is the right to live, the right to be of some use, and not just to be made blindly available to an indifferent society. He insists upon the right his experience has to be made richly meaningful, and for most of us that effort and its successful realization has to be a co-operative effort and a shared success. Morally speaking, if socialism means anything, my synthesis and my satisfactions are luxuries that I do not deserve if you, my friend, are still struggling for yours and are denied them. This is really what Jimmy Porter is about, as a dramatic creation, and the flood of facetiousness about angry young men has obscured the genuine pathos of his condition. (One has to say pathos, not tragedy. Mr. Osborne is not a Lawrence or a Myers, or an Arthur Miller either.)

But it is at this juncture of course that somebody comes in and tells us that all Mr. Osborne's satisfactions are ready to hand. Since 1945 he has had merely to stretch out an arm and gather them. After all the Labour Government instituted the basic reforms and we can now cheerfully move into the millenium of a reformed capitalism, with working class experience transformed into an endowed consumerhood. But one credits Mr. Osborne and the many who are like him with something more than the equivocal appetites that capitalism has traditionally sanctioned. The moral objectives of our society, the notions of what constitutes enviable social success are what they were in the heyday of *laissez-faire*, shrouded in metaphor

though they are. (Mr. Worsthorne after all is a feeble substitute for Bentham, and Professor Oakeshott but the ghost of Hobbes.) One has merely to read a newspaper or scan an advert to note the old-style morality gilded in deference to the elementary moral claims of the welfare state. And, like Ezra Pound's soldier, one comes

home to many deceptions,
home to old lies and new infamy;
usury age-old and age-thick
and liars in public places.

The "condition of England question" is as urgent as it was in the days before Sartor Resartus! It is hardly an improvement of any real or lasting kind to appear to let more people guzzle at the trough than were able to before, or to offer the unconscious bribe of a university education to those who get over the grammar school hurdle. And in that "appear" lies the clue to the nature of contemporary capitalism. Many are called but few can become executives, few can get their hands on a bit of real power, the power that really gives our society its moral tone and texture. I do not of course mean party power, as who would except those who see anything in the frenzied impotence of *Spectator* accounts of the House of Commons. We know without Mr. Crosland to tell us that the standard of living of the working class has improved since the 1930s and that they have so far obtained larger securities than were available to them then. But this in no sense justifies the view of things that virtually expresses itself in the phrase: "You have full bellies so what are you squawking about?" The newly enfranchised working and sub-middle class man needs more than just a larger income than Dad ever earned, and without taking his jacket off either. He may not be interested in it when he knows the consequences—the freedom to turn himself into a passable version of his traditional opponents, while class lines are blurred under the deluge from the H.P. cornucopia. And so Jimmy Porter sticks to his sweetstall.

I find, when I read through so far, that I have not said very much about Mr. Osborne. Yet it should be clear that his is the authentic voice of the context outlined above, and it is a humanist voice even with the limitations that he has. He is right to pillory the John Company ethics of the gunboat thinkers, but his socialism so far comes across to me as a negative creed held because the people he dislikes don't hold it. Equally he seems too easily satirical about the iridescence of unpleasant kinds of bloc experience, too much without the cogent and sympathetic inwardness with which Arthur Miller responds to people like Willy Loman and Eddie Carbone. Up to the present, at any rate, Mr. Osborne's convictions about lower middle class and working class experience are a matter of assertion in prose pieces and have yet to be demonstrated in art. His immediately obvious dangers are intellectual *hubris*, modish satire and a failure to realize that the world the artist inhabits is immeasurably larger than

Broadway, Sloane Square and Mr. Tynan's column. At the same time he shows a fatal tendency to take up the stance that society leaves him room for, and not only him but any intellectual, half buffoon and half gadfly, but everything being all right really. When one emerges professionally as an intellectual in England one shares the kiss of death—one is allowed one's tantrums in exchange for the lethal immunization that society appears to insist on—a deal of money, if one is lucky, a puff or two in the Beaverbrook press, a liberal allowance of deprecating whimsy when one is talking about one's function as a writer. The Victorians, even the mediocrities, realized that their necessary purpose as the liberators, as the mediators between their readers and the conceivable Truth, was more important than themselves. Whereas English intellectual life has for too many years resembled an inferior kind of salon culture with various official and para-official bodies as hostesses. Mr. Osborne needs to tread warily otherwise the system will appropriate him and condition the end-product. Look what it did for Colin Wilson. And finally, of course, none of them really cares, none of them minds very much unless somebody invades their precinct, or the Tory Government does something particularly stupid—as it often does—then listen to the bladders thwack.

If there is material for tragedy today, then it is to be found in what may be described as the tragedy of moral idealism, the cruel waste of honest intentions. If you are an intellectual then no matter what you do you will meet the smart comeback. Somebody, some professional or expert somewhere, will slap you down. If you try to think about society, try to clear away some of the refuse, sooner or later you will encounter the Gorgon's head of Professor Oakeshott. Or some historian, in the interests of accuracy, will tell you that the 19th century, *laissez-faire*, the 1820s weren't really as bad as you thought they were. If you are thinking about the moral life, or the difficulties of human relationships, before you get far you will find Kingsley Martin or Lord Russell a decade or two ahead, smoothing the way

for you, or Mr. Paul Johnson itching to give you a helping hand. Mr. Osborne's virtue, and it is an important one, is that he speaks out for the neglected human being inside you, insists upon the value of your quintessential self, with its ignorance, its aspiration and compassion, its capacity for moral experience, and its irrepressible need to be and do. Jimmy Porter, let them smile who will, is a potential moral agent, pathetically inhibited in his desire to realize himself. Matthew Arnold, defending his account of poetic success as "the noble and profound application of ideas to life" continued:

"If it is said that to call these ideas *moral* ideas is to introduce a strong and injurious limitation, I answer that it is to do nothing of the kind, because moral ideas are really so main a part of life. The question, *how to live*, is itself a moral idea; and it is the question which most interests every man, and with which in some way or other, he is perpetually occupied. A large sense is of course to be given to the term *moral*. Whatever bears upon the question 'how to live' comes under it."

Mr. Osborne's art does not work at the level indicated here, but it insists that the question, as posed above, be brought to the fore in our world, and he is one of the very few who are doing this at the moment. And yet, with the question barely recognized, it is enquired, by the eminent vulgarians, what has he to be angry about? Just how, for example, is the national cultural achievement accessible to him or to anyone like him? The fact that he has been to a University is neither here nor there, when he has seen both at the University and elsewhere, that culture shrugged off, ignored, or traduced by bookmaking dons, and the few in this century who have tried to sustain it forced to do it quite alone and when the Managing Editor of *Woman's Own* tells us that: "Women's magazines have succeeded in meeting woman's deeply needed feeling of 'belonging'—belonging to a friendly magazine, belonging to a great group of women reading the same magazine, belonging to a vast new money-earning woman's world which their particular magazine understands and

is sympathetic towards" (7,000,000 women read Mr. Drawbell's own sympathetic and understanding magazine). How fortunate that such a profitable need should coincide with the penetration of one of the lushest fields of late capitalism. But of course there is no significant connection—it would be a slander upon "ordinary people" to suggest that there was. Mr. Osborne tells us, on the other hand, that there is no such thing as "ordinary people" but just people, bluffed, wretched or confused, each with his unique and precious possession—his life. Human life is difficult enough, childbirth and death, loneliness, failures in marriage and purpose, the bringing up of children, disease and mental breakdown. Some are strenuous but satisfying responsibilities, others mark the fringe of horror within which we are all to some extent environed. They are all rooted in the joy and pain of living, and moral experience is their acceptance in the effort to transcend our limitations and to act with decency, kindness and intelligence. Of course we will fail, and our literature is the great commentary on our failure and our achievement. And to talk with meaning one needs to talk for all people. In so far as we are able we should share the satisfactions and the dangers, and not take refuge behind the seedy protagonists of the "nation," the "empire," the "Western way of life," or behind the greedy blackguards who talk of the menace of equality (when we all suffer alike), or of the corrupting influences of the welfare state (what have they in mind, one wonders, adolescent victims of our strategic concepts of education, or someone in her fourth pregnancy drinking herself to death on the family allowance?). Whatever Tory thinkers may say, we are entitled to a society in which we can be valuable, bringing our integrity to the common fund. If we are simply going to cling with the tenacity of pythons to what we can separately wring out of the total material product, then we have nothing to say to each other or about each other, but everything to conceal, and the bomb might as well fall. Mr. Osborne (and one or two others) are a salutary reminder to the effect that we are, after all, alive.