

*The Collapse of Materialism* is a serious thing—for materialists. How serious, appears under that title; but there is merriment by the wayside, as in "Electrons for the Elect," and "The Priest and the Proton." Indeed one could sit up late inventing slogans for new religions, as: *Your sins will cost you more; What is eternity? Wait and see; Heaven here, no B— Fear.*

The next essay too can be made into a slogan for Spain: Ballot-Box supreme, makes English Liberals scream. *The Well and the Shallows*, which gives the title to the collection, is a highly ingenious contrast between the Church which has debated all things and the Modern Mind which cannot make up its mind, but falls back on forbidding one thing or another. "It will not accept the Catholic doctrine that life is a battle: it only wants to have announced from time to time in the newspapers, that it is a victory." This is much deeper than it looks.

Again, "the thing once called Free Thought has destroyed everything that is free. It denies personal freedom in denying free will and the human power of choice. It began as a drive and ended as a drift. By this philosophy, we all died before we were born. It is Kismet without Allah, it is Calvinism without God."

Forty-one articles at 7/6 is under twopence per column of the daily paper, and less fugitive at that. The writer carries us along at such a rate that we incline to forget one good thing in fresh delight at a better thing still, and he seems so simple that we may miss the deeps, or the Truth which is at the bottom of his well. Thomas Derrick portrays him on the dust-jacket looking rather casually into a well. Exquisitely appropriate and suggestive of a Master of Sentences disguised as a journalist.

JOHN O'CONNOR.

THE DESTRUCTIVE ELEMENT. By Stephen Spender. (Cape, 7/6.)

Criticism, to-day, has not very much depth or significance. Much of it (and there is too much of it) consists in explaining the isolation of artists in society: it sympathizes and praises but serves no constructive purpose. Consequently when another critic comes forward we feel strongly the relevancy of the words of the Apocalypse: "Because thou art lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth." Or we ask with André Gide, "How can one still dare to talk of art to-day?" Gide is referring to the millions of men without art, without spiritual life of any kind and with precious little even of material life: to the dull, machine-like community on whose good estate art depends.

This book, however, coming from a contemporary poet, would seem, at first, more promising. Nor does Spender altogether disappoint us. In the Epilogue he says: "In this book I have

tried to show that, apart from all question of tendency, there is in our modern literature a consistent tradition of writing that has a political-moral subject." In Spender's view, Henry James is both the greatest writer in this tradition and the source of it. Consequently more than a third of the book is devoted to a detailed criticism of James and his work. Having chosen his one great writer, Spender then allows the others to fall into their places. The second part of the book is a criticism of the writers of the middle period of the tradition: of Eliot, Yeats, Lawrence and Joyce. He concludes with a survey of Kafka and the young contemporary poets and writers: of Auden, C. Day Lewis and Upward.

The main defect of Spender's book is summed up in this sentence from the Introduction: "What interests me here is what writers write about, the subjects of literature." He may be surprised to hear that this question has stirred the curiosity of others. At all events, it would be more profitable to let others find this out for themselves. In his analyses of writers, brilliant though they sometimes are, he forgets the subject of his book. Spender lacks a broad conception of the whole problem. He loses the thread of his argument in discussions on technical matters. Further to understand such a subject and to form a valuable judgment on it from a politico-moral point of view, a thorough knowledge of the conflicting beliefs in contemporary society is surely desirable. Thus when talking of Christianity in general, or Eliot's position as an Anglo-Catholic in particular, he shows a bewildering ignorance of the one and a complacent vagueness about the other. A similar vagueness is apparent in the chapter on Yeats. There is obviously a clear distinction between Yeats's early and later poetry: yet Spender offers no explanation of this change in Yeats himself and his relation to the whole tradition. Unfortunately Spender's prose style makes us more conscious of his deficiencies. It would not be unfair to say that his prose was sober—just that.

In the last part of his book Spender discusses the beliefs and ideas of the younger writers and poets. In each, he notes an acute awareness of the unbelief, purposelessness, social injustice, futility and lack of spiritual values in the world to-day. He fails to point out the lack of any constructive outlook. Many, indeed, are greatly influenced by Communism. They will not however make up their minds about it. If the intelligentsia will not create a coherent system and save themselves, they cannot expect the masses to be saved. Apropos of a constructive policy Spender would do well to realize that Christianity is not the effete institution of a bygone age—but an active force in the modern world.

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