

THE ESTATE OF POETRY, by Edwin Muir; The Hogarth Press; 16s.

EDWIN MUIR, by P. H. Butter; Oliver and Boyd (Writers and Critics); 5s.

In his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, delivered at Harvard in 1955-56 and now issued in book form under the title *The Estate of Poetry*, the late Edwin Muir considered what is probably the most crucial poetic problem today – namely, the size of the gap between poetry and the public, and the complex reasons for this gap. Muir is (I shall speak of him in the present tense because, both as poet and as critic, Muir still seems very much a living presence among us) far too intelligent and well-informed to advocate a return to peasant life, a form of living from which great natural verse, such as the ballads, has flowered in the past. He sees our present literary situation as part of an inexorable historical process and declares, 'if the peasantry . . . has now no poetry of its own, and the more leisured classes are also without the poetry they used to cultivate and enjoy, this has not come about because of some change in the nature of poetry, but because of an historical process which has radically transformed society and the life which it offers alike to ordinary and extraordinary human beings.' And Muir rightly goes on to point out that 'the fears of poets for the future of poetry are merely a part of the general fear, known so well to all of us, for the future of the world.'

As a poet, Muir himself always shunned both superficial realism and poetry as simply a personal outlet for the poet, a form of self-expression. The eternal and the time-bound and the conflict between them are both the substance and the background of his verse. So, when he comes to consider the plight of poetry today, the shrinking of its audience, the slow dying of its public importance, Muir sees these problems as cosmic and as immediate dilemmas; he feels that men today have lost the sense of wonder, and continues, 'Trying to distinguish it (the world we live in) from these other worlds, one sees it more and more as a world of secondary objects, of finished articles.' This conception of poetry as a mode of knowledge and inquiry seems to be important and original: and Muir's development of the idea – that poetry somehow *completes* our knowledge and awareness – is surely quite new.

Muir sees no hope for poetry in the facile taking over of modern inventions made for our use or pleasure (the 'Pylon Poets' of the thirties are thus implicitly condemned by him). Indeed, he states unequivocally that 'it is impossible to write a poem about motor cars, except in a false rhetorical vein, for they have no life except what we give them by pushing a starter. The finished article is finished in a final sense; sometimes we can admire its functional beauty, but it is impervious to the imagination.'

Muir was not in love with the past; he admired it deeply, yes, but he was too keenly aware of the movements and necessary developments of time, to refuse to be carried along by it himself. Yet he did not believe in the absolute relentless-ness of time. Man's will and his individual spirit (manifested particularly in

human courage, generosity, and compassion) are eternal things, participations in the divine life. The tension between these two modes of being, the time-bound and the eternal, is responsible for Muir's finest poetry.

Towards the end of his life, Muir admitted that he had been a Christian for a long time without completely realizing it. His deep religious sense, his attitude of detachment and acceptance, his understanding of the meaning and value of suffering – these things have coloured and deepened both his poetry and his great *Autobiography*. They also colour these lectures. Muir's tone is deceptively quiet – it always was – but it would be a very great mistake to ignore what he has to say on this account. In analysing the gap today between the poet and his public, Muir has said some of the wisest things I have ever read on this complex subject. He is far too subtle to blame one single factor – education, television, industrialization, or whatever it may be – for this breakdown in understanding. Nor does he exonerate the poet himself completely; he feels that poets have retreated too far into their own inner, private worlds, that they have sometimes made an art which should be public a matter of esoteric relationships and understanding. And he also blames the New Critics, both for encouraging the study of individual poems without recourse to biography or literary history, and for making the reading of poetry a game of wits rather than a matter of illumination and of deepening the reader's knowledge and experience of life.

When he speaks of the stark simplicities of the ballads or of Homer, Muir demonstrates how, for him, poetry was always a reconciling power, not an escape, nor a play of language, and never an entry into a secret society. But he does not feel hopeless about the present situation in poetry. With modesty and yet also with faith, he declares, 'What I have tried to urge is that poetry will not be truly contemporary, or truly poetry, if it deals merely with the immediately perceived contemporary world as if that existed by itself and were isolated from all that preceded it . . . the dream life of the unconscious with its own image of life is certain some time to enter into and deepen the archetypal images of the imagination. I mean the actual dream life, not the daydream or the decorative fantasy . . . Our world presents the imagination with certain questions not asked before, or not asked in the same way. Public indifference may be expected to continue, but perhaps the audience will increase when poetry loses what obscurity is left in it by attempting greater themes, for great themes have to be stated clearly.'

The situation may be desperate, but Muir is still hopeful. If he had lived, he might well have admitted that the poetic situation is even more desperate today, but I think he would also have remained confident. Important poetry was never, for him, a mere question of fashion, movements or fluctuating tastes. He did much to encourage new poets and I believe he saw in their best work a return to order, clarity and technical excellence. From his own sufferings, he knew only too well that though the unconscious may yield shining symbols, it is no place for the poet to linger in too long. Man's greatest experiences are produced by the relationship between his inner world of imagination and the

outer world of other men, nature, and eternity. There is torment in this, and few poets knew it better than Muir, but it is also man's only hope of redemption and of happiness.

Professor Butter's short study of Muir and his work is worthy of its subject. He approaches the poems with respect and with intelligence, but he never makes the mistake of trying to separate the writer and the man. Perhaps Muir's own lucid, profound and resonant last poems are the best coda to his Harvard lectures. Their allegiances are often rooted in the past, but their urgency speaks poignantly yet confidently to our contemporary world.

ELIZABETH JENNINGS

A PREFACE TO THE FAERIE QUEEN, by Graham Hough; Duckworth; 25s.

This book seems to be, at least in part, modelled upon Professor C. S. Lewis' *Preface to Paradise Lost*, and like that work, is intended as a corrective. Mr Graham Hough is of opinion that Spenser's great poem is less known and less loved than it should be, and that to restore it to its true position, the reader should be led to approach not through the allegory – the line taken by several recent books – but by way of its genre as a romantic epic.

In setting forth this view the author gives an exposition of the romantic epic as such, and of Spenser's Italian models, which should be exceedingly useful to students, especially those who have no Italian. His insistence on Spenser's essential independence of all the poets and philosophers whose work he draws upon so freely, is timely and important.

But no one can exhaust the riches of the *Faerie Queene* in one book and Mr Graham Hough, being obliged to play down something, has played down the allegory and the special purpose Spenser avows, to which playing down a somewhat Grundyish conception of morals has contributed. Concentration on the narrative and on the human aspect of the persons keeps Mr Graham Hough rather on the surface of the poem, but this may be all the better if the readers whose approach has been thus made easy, are led to seek the depths for themselves.

SR MARY PAULINE, I. B. V. M.

JUST OFF THE AISLE – The Ramblings of a Catholic Critic, by Richard A. Duprey; Newman Press; \$3.95.

Philistinism laced with self-righteousness, a Jansenist conscience and a handbook of moral theology – these, in the opinion of too many Catholics, are the proper qualifications of a critic of the liberal arts. Their possessor is automatically entitled to write letters of bitter complaint to the press about plays or films he has not seen, and books he has no intention of reading; to censure the judgment, taste (and even the good faith) of professional Catholic critics whose lives are spent in grappling thoughtfully with just those problems which (it is assumed)