

AN AMERICAN CRITIC¹

W. W. ROBSON

MR BLACKMUR is an American critic of considerable reputation—to judge from this book, not undeserved. This is the first substantial work of his I have read: I knew him previously as an authority on Henry James's *Prefaces*, which I thought he overrated as criticism. The frequent bracketing of them (as of equal critical interest) with Flaubert's *Letters* is unfortunate: James's greatness in criticism is more unequivocally manifest in the essays on French poets and novelists and in the book on Hawthorne. Mr Blackmur, however, himself shows (not always with happy results) the influence of the James of the *Prefaces* (and sometimes of other Jamesian manners: the autobiographical anecdote on page 9 is told in the style of *A Small Boy and Others*). His own virtues as a critic are a refreshing absence of the genteel kind of academicism and some powers of analysis of poetic effects—in which he shows the influence of Mr Empson. His general value-judgments and ascriptions of importance are not always to be trusted, and his critical tact (or 'touch') can be questionable, but we may usually expect intelligent and unexpected comments from him—though they sometimes are rather marginal. The characteristic vice of his writing is corrugation—unnecessary difficulty; he falls into 'pseudo-botanical' jargon of the kind D. H. Lawrence objected to, fails satisfactorily to tackle his themes or even, at times, to make them intelligible, and at his worst shows a peculiarly American kind of externality—a lack of inner understanding of the work, or the man, he is considering. Often the labour of making out what he means is much out of proportion to anything the reader eventually gets out of it. And finally, in some of the essays (see for example the last included, *Lord Tennyson's Scissors*—this jocular title being a reference to Tennyson's remark that he knew the metrical value of every English word except, perhaps, 'scissors') it is not clear what kind of discipline is controlling his procedure; it certainly does not seem to be a critical one. Indiscipline may also be seen in his way of using his key terms—some of them, like 'gesture' itself, are applied so variously as to be of very doubtful use.

¹ *Language as Gesture: Essays in the Craft and Elucidation of Modern Poetry*. By R. P. Blackmur. (Allen and Unwin; 25s.)

Mr Blackmur makes some interesting attempts in his first essay, and elsewhere, at stating the *definiens* of poetry—poetry that is poetry and nothing else; but I cannot see that he gets nearer an adequate statement than does M. Thierry Maulnier: 'L'effort de la poésie française vers la poésie pure n'est donc point un effort pour priver le poème de tout contenu autre que la poésie, ce qui n'aurait pas de sens, mais pour donner au poème le pouvoir d'agir poétiquement sur la totalité de son contenu.' The value of this kind of generality depends on a demonstration of its usefulness in the critic's practice. So I will confine this review to considering some examples of Mr Blackmur's performance as a critic: the importance we attach to his conceptions of poetry, and of poets' use of language, must largely depend upon what we think of this.

Mr Blackmur's critical virtues are on the whole in evidence in his essay on Emily Dickinson, the conclusion of which runs: '... the bulk of her verse is not representative but mere fragmentary indicative notation. The pity of it is that the document her whole work makes shows nothing so much as that she had the themes, the insight, the observation, and the capacity for honesty, which had she only known how—or only known why—would have made the major instead of the minor fraction of her verse genuine poetry. But her dying society had no tradition by which to teach her the one lesson she did not know by instinct.' The first sentence here, with its 'representative' and 'indicative', is in a graceless jargon—though it does not say nothing. The second sentence is clumsily written; the first seventeen words could have been advantageously replaced by 'This is a pity, because her work as a whole shows . . .', and what is said, though sound enough, is not a proof of remarkable percipience. It is only the third sentence which plainly comes from a distinguished critic. Here, then, we have the typical mixture in Mr Blackmur's work: almost any page would provide similar examples. The summary I have quoted follows an extensive (but not, as sometimes in Mr Blackmur, over-elaborate) analysis of Emily Dickinson's linguistic oddities and her characteristic failure, in much of her verse, to make a poem that was a poem for anyone but herself. Anyone who is interested in her can find here a good discussion of the reasons why, in comparison for instance with the author of *Songs of Experience*, she seems so fragmentary, provincial, and inadequate.

Mr Blackmur is not so good on a greater poet, Thomas Hardy,

though he makes some excellent incidental remarks ('Hardy is the great example of a sensibility violated by ideas'—a reversal of Eliot's early comment on James). Hardy undoubtedly produced, in the course of his long literary career, a good deal of poor, eccentric, or glumly whimsical work. But Mr Blackmur gives far too much space to it. An essay on Hardy's poetry should not pass over in silence things like *The Voice*, *The Self-Unseeing*, *After a Journey*, *Paying Calls*, *During Wind and Rain*, *After the Visit* . . . there are a few others, but not many, of such poems, reaching a level on which Hardy's 'ideas, formulas, obsessions' (to quote Mr Blackmur) do not exist, and Hardy, as is so rarely the case, is both strongly idiosyncratic and a poet. But even of the *Veteris Vestigia Flammae* poems Mr Blackmur discusses only a minor one, *The Walk*. I disagree also with many of his incidental judgments—his high rating of the poem on the *Titanic*, for instance, and even, apparently, of the Swinburnesque elegy on Swinburne. And I feel that he presents us with Middleton Murry's 'modern' Hardy rather than with the great Victorian.

The two essays on the later Yeats bear interestingly on the question of the kind of value and validity we need ascribe to that poet's 'philosophy' (in *A Vision* and the like). Mr Blackmur argues that Yeats had to have his 'system' to produce his 'tragic poetry', but that it is also to Yeats's credit that, 'when the system fails him', he attempts to create 'a dramatic, concrete equivalent for it'. Surely Yeats's 'system' can only interest the admirer of his poetry if and when he does something 'dramatic' and 'concrete' with it. And surely in passing from *No Second Troy* or *Adam's Curse* to *Sailing to Byzantium* or *Among School Children* we have not passed from one kind of poetry to another—a 'philosophical' or 'systematic' kind: we may have passed from the lesser to the greater, but in so far as the greater is more full-bodied, involving a wider and deeper organization of the poet's interests, so far do we have less need of external support or reference—whether that be provided by our outside knowledge of the 'system' of the dabbler in occultism and amateur of idealist philosophy, of the declared attitudes of the Irish public figure, or of the pride, rage, or grief of the man who suffered. Certainly Yeats's own interest in the elaborations of his 'system', together with his dealings in myth, mystery, and the occult, do present the critic with a real problem. Mr Blackmur, however, offers only this solution: we should

'accept Yeats's magic literally as a machinery of meaning . . . search out the prose parallels and reconstruct the symbols he uses on their own terms in order to come on the emotional reality, if it is there, actually in the poems—when the machinery can be dispensed with'. He does not explain *why* we should have to do all this. Which is tantamount to saying that, in his dealings with Yeats, he is not enough of a critic. He attempts, it is true, to dissociate his approach from that of the expositor-exegete who takes the poet's success as poet for granted; but this dissociation would have told more if he had attempted a more summary, and more critical, treatment of Yeats's poetry as a whole—a concise statement of just what it leaves us with.

Suppose it were said, in answer to Mr Blackmur's or Mr Ellmann's claims for Yeats, that the poetry leaves us with little more than a manner; a conscious impressiveness of *tenue* implicitly claiming more respect for itself than, on reflection, we find that it justifies. That estimate would need immediate qualification when we think of the superb poise or balance realized (if not sustained in its successors) in *The Tower* volume. But without bearing it in mind we may well find ourselves, like Mr Blackmur, shading off into the kind of industrious Yeats-exegete which at the outset he seemed determined not to be. Something of the same fate befell Mr Cleanth Brooks in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*.

Mr Blackmur writes effectively on Yeats's stimulator Ezra Pound. While wishing he was even more explicit on this point, one does gather, by comparing his accounts of both poets, that he is conscious of Yeats's superiority as a creative genius to Pound; while at the same time he lays the right stress upon Pound's great, and varied, services to literature. He puts the *Cantos* firmly in their place, and writes well of *Mauberley*, though my own approbation of what he says about this last poem is qualified by his setting the *Propertius* above it. I greatly admire the *Propertius*, but *Mauberley* is a unique concentration of the poet's powers, and in its fine expression of a more than personal irony, horror, and pity, might be called Pound's *Vanity of Human Wishes*. And it still commonly receives much less than critical justice. But Mr Blackmur does on the whole give convincing backing to his general conclusion that 'poets of the class in which Pound shines are of absolute preliminary necessity for the continuing life of poetry'.

Mr Blackmur's essays on Eliot contain some striking things—

for example, the statement of the difference between Eliot and Dante (p. 218), which he enlarges admirably into a statement of the differences between the age of Eliot and the age of Dante. His essay on the plays is shrewd and forceful, though Catholic readers may not be satisfied with some of his incidental remarks about the Christian religion—Fr Victor White, I imagine, might have criticisms of the view that the Church as 'docent' (Mr Blackmur's word) can only turn helplessly away from modern psychology. On the *Four Quartets* Mr Blackmur tends to fall into a kind of 'creative' commentary which comes between us and the verse. As so often, the elucidator, intent on 'doing justice' to the poetry, turns out to be really less modest than the critic (for all his protestations of a greater humility): his light proves to be darkness.

The other essays do not call for extensive discussion here. Mr Blackmur writes a good deal on minor American poets of more or less interest—Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Allen Tate, E. E. Cummings, H.D., and William Carlos Williams are among those discussed. He approves in the main of the first three of these, disapproves of the last three. He takes rather long to make his points, and indulges sometimes in excessive and over-ingenious analysis; and, for all his vigour and candour, he again seems to lack critical force and edge. Thus: why does he take so many pages over Cummings, and not say straight out that he is not a poet at all? For I don't think Mr Blackmur would disagree about Cummings: as he would, I am afraid, about Hart Crane.

Mr Blackmur's conception of criticism, and his attitude to other critics, are expounded in the essay on 'A Critic's Job of Work.' The sections on Santayana, Van Wyck Brooks, and Granville Hicks (the last affording Mr Blackmur with the opportunity of some effective demolition-work) are well worth reading. This essay is superior to the last two, in which Mr Blackmur's generalizing propensities do not appear to the best advantage, and they contain some amazing collocations, of which I have only room to cite one ('D. H. Lawrence and Hart Crane'—p. 433). Taken with other things in the book, they make me wonder whether Mr Blackmur's dictum that 'criticism is not autonomous', acceptable as it is in itself, is not contradicted by the claim for the elucidator which it is produced to support. In any case, when Mr Blackmur himself is a sound elucidator—when he really brings light—it is clear that he is also a critic.