

# Edmund Wilson's Essays

THE TRIPLE THINKERS. By Edmund Wilson. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1938. \$2.75.

Reviewed by ERNEST BOYD

ALTHOUGH publishers constantly assure one that volumes of collected essays, literary or otherwise, do not sell, it is fortunate for those of us who are addicted to this form of literature that such volumes can now and then be added to our shelves, beside the unwanted works of such people as Sainte-Beuve, George Saintsbury, Jules Lemaitre, Anatole France, and Georg Brandes. If they had not been allowed to collect their essays from periodicals, we should be much the poorer. Mr. Wilson may not rank with these illustrious dead, but at least he has been given the opportunity to bring together a very readable sheaf of literary essays. They are ten in number and range from Paul Elmer More to Pushkin, from Flaubert and Henry James to "Marxism and Literature."

The opening chapter, "Mr. More and the Mithraic Bull," is not a full length study of that worthy pedant, but an amusingly sub-acid account of an afternoon at More's house in Princeton, with Dean Gauss and Mr. Frank Jewett Mather, during which Mithraism, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce were the subjects of conversation. Mr. Wilson contrives by the neatest of occasional strokes to reveal a perfect picture of an utterly provincial, completely hidebound pedagogue. His comments on everything contemporary were plainly asinine, but had that asininity of the schoolmaster who expects his class to obey. So long as it was a question of citing texts and quoting authorities, Mr. More was everything that an examiner could demand of a very studious pupil. Unless a statement could be backed by an "authority" he was inclined to suspect the speaker. I wonder whether Mr. Wilson did not sputter over his teacup when Mr. More dismissed Baudelaire by saying that, while he might have power and significance, he was not "a guide to life"!

In his essay on Pushkin, which deals only with "Evgeni Onegin" and "The Bronze Horseman," Mr. Wilson proceeds by way of part translation and part summary to try to convey something of this great genius, who has been so slightly appreciated by the world outside Russia. Not that attempts have not been made, both in English and French, to spread his fame. Mr. Wilson says rather casually that George Borrow published some translations from Pushkin in 1835, as if

that was the beginning and end of the matter. The fact is that "Eugene Onegin" (as it is usually rendered in English) was translated as early as 1881, "The Captain's Daughter" in 1859, "Marie" in 1877, a volume of poems in 1889, and translators of the stories have been numerous since as far back as 1875. Mr. Wilson makes a gallant effort to enlist admiration for Pushkin's masterpiece, but I fear "Evgeni Onegin," except as an opera libretto, will remain as closed a book to most English-speaking readers as "Os Lusitadas" of Camoens.

Since the literati have taken up Marxism, it is difficult to find a volume of critical essays which is not (a) devoid of criticism and (b) filled with puerile propaganda, supposedly inspired by the immortal, omniscient, and omnipotent Marx and Engels. I have on occasion discussed at length this Marxist "criticism," by quoting the incredible nonsense itself and by pointing out the dreadful effect upon one's critical faculties of this "opium of the intelligentsia." Mr. Wilson's "Marxism and Literature" approaches the same subject, with more or less the same objective as myself, but from the opposite angle. That is to say, he sets out to show that



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Marx and Engels were never as silly and unscrupulous in their comments on literature as Mr. Granville Hicks and the book reviewers of the *New Masses* and *The Daily Worker*. Everybody can quote the Marxian scriptures to suit his purpose, and possibly Mr. Hicks will confound Mr. Wilson. The latter quotes Lenin as gently rebuking a communist youth who despised Pushkin as bourgeois and preferred the true proletarian, Mayakovsky. Lenin said: "I think Pushkin is better." He also read and reread "War and Peace." Trotsky, of course, stated categorically that the expression "proletarian literature" was ridiculous. What, I think, Mr. Wilson might usefully have added to his essay was a brief examination of the present status of literary criticism in America as directed by the Comintern.

"Bernard Shaw at Eighty" is a brief on behalf of the thesis that Shaw will really survive as an artist rather than as a thinker, this despite popular opinion to the contrary and Shaw's own reiterated statement that he is a journalist. It is pleasant these days to one like myself, suckled on Fabianism, to read a freshly appreciative essay on a writer whom it is the great pleasure of his abject inferiors to decry. Whether the owner of a brain which is one of the most beautiful intellectual weapons I have ever seen at work or play is an artist of the first rank I

doubt, although Mr. Wilson's case is well argued. If he is, then I should say he is, in the same sense as Swift was. Neither appeals to the esthetic or emotional side of man. If you are touched at all, it is through the brain. In fact, it has always seemed to me that Shaw the playwright was an accident of his period. Had he been a contemporary of Swift, their pamphlets and satires and lampoons would have jointly set the town by the ears. But two Swifts in Dublin at the same time would have been too much!

Mr. Wilson writes appreciatively, but not uncritically, of John Jay Chapman, of whom he has long and properly been an admirer. For all Chapman's anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism (toward the end of his life), he was a real man, a real character, and a real Harvard man—though it is to this last aspect of him that Mr. Wilson is disposed to be least sympathetic, quoting some of those academic provincialisms which jump us back to the Paul Elmer More tea party. Of "Flaubert's Politics" Mr. Wilson discovers that, for all his lifelong contempt for the bourgeoisie, Flaubert was too much of a bourgeois himself not to be horrified by the Paris Commune. But he was "unable to believe in, or even to conceive, any non-bourgeois way out." This, after all, is rather an open secret, and I cannot quite make out whether or not Flaubert was wrong, in Mr. Wilson's estimation, for finally embodying his contempt for humanity, in the mass, in "Bouvard and Pécuchet." Much has occurred since to convince me that Flaubert was only too right.

## Immortal Queen

WINGED PHARAOH. By Joan Grant. New York: Harper & Bros. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ASHTON SANBORN

MANKIND in general has always scoffed at what it did not understand in the realm of the supernatural; but the testimony of sincere and noble mystics bears witness through the ages to a faith in the divine origin of the soul and in its immortal quality so ardent and so persistent that it cannot be ignored as utterly baseless.

On the assumption that the reputed wisdom of the ancient Egyptians was true knowledge of this divine source of all life, and not the hocus-pocus of magic which the materialistic modern world believes it to have been, Mrs. Grant has written a story distinguished for poetic beauty of style and for sustained power, which becomes increasingly convincing in its purpose as it progresses. In autobiographical form *Sekeeta*, a non-historical Egyptian princess of the First Dynasty (which archeologists date about 4000 B. C.), relates the story of her life from the moment when she was told by the Great Overlords that she must be reborn into exile upon earth, until by death she

has been released from this exile and returned to her true home.

The book is not strictly a novel, but rather a mystical chronicle of things lovely, far away, and lost; the image of a golden age which perhaps has never existed save in the minds of those who seek refuge from facts in dreams of the prenatal paradise. But to this paradise, when envisaged upon earth, the author has given the strict geographical limitations of the Nile valley; its chronological aspect, however, is timeless, and consequently the reader should not be irked by certain anachronisms, or by the fact that archeological accuracy is at a discount when the author's purpose is to achieve spiritual and not factual truth. For the ultimate impression made by the book is its deliberate detachment from specific time. Although relatively few persons today will accept transmigration or clairvoyance as incidents normal to human experience, none will deny that the salvation not only of our souls but of ourselves and our civilization must depend on vanquishing the greed, brutality, rivalry, and hatred which cast their evil shadow of unwisdom over the earth today. Sekeeta sums up the situation when she says: "Men of themselves create their time on Earth: if they sow evil, they must return to gather their harvest. . . . The future is in the hands of mankind."

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## Miss Keller's Travel Diary

*HELEN KELLER'S JOURNAL. By Helen Keller. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1938. \$2.50.*

Reviewed by REBECCA LOWRIE

**I**N August 1928, Mrs. Macy and Miss Thomson finished reading the galley proofs of "Midstream" to Helen Keller. In the biography of Anne Sullivan Macy (Miss Keller's teacher through many years) there is a brief but telling description of the occasion. A storm raged outside the Cohasset cottage. Inside there was exhaustion and peace. Mrs. Macy's eyes had lasted for the task. Miss Keller felt that she was free of the incredible labor of sustained composition, free to devote herself to her work for the deaf and blind. She interrupted her washing of the breakfast dishes to deliver her ultimatum: wet dish towel flung over her shoulder, her hands gripping the back of a chair—"I just want to say this," she announced. "There will be no more books. I put the best years of my childhood and youth into 'The Story of My Life.' I have put the best years of my womanhood into 'Midstream.' There will be no more books."

Ten years later another book is written; written without the presence and the tireless cooperation of Mrs. Macy; written, in

all probability, as a record of a spiritual crisis more intense than any Miss Keller had ever experienced. The "Journal" was begun on the *Deutschland*, at midnight of November 4th, 1936, less than a month after Mrs. Macy's death. Miss Keller and her devoted companion Polly Thomson were on their way to visit friends in Scotland and to begin the process of readjustment which was to be the test not only of Mrs. Macy's method of teaching, but of the soundness of her preparation for the time when her pupil would have to function without her.

The "Journal," it seems to me, is a warm and human document. Miss Keller's natural grief permeates the earlier pages. Passionately she records her loneliness, her desolation—but in the next entry she says "To my surprise I find that the sea-swallows have waked in me fresh courage—thoughts. I am still weary and every physical exertion is an effort, but gradually I am regaining my habit of 'looking-around'."

In London she met old friends; jotted down items about new plays, and the books she borrowed for her reading in Scotland; and paid a visit to the doll exhibition in the National Institute and described her two favorite dolls, from their curls to their slippers.

In the same entry she says:

Lack of hearing has always been a heavier handicap to me than blindness. Sealed ears render more difficult every path to knowledge. The deaf are as hungry for a word as the blind are for a book under their fingers, yet it is harder to find people who will talk with the deaf than people who will supply the sightless with embossed books. . . . Regretfully I perceive the impossibility of working for both the blind and the deaf. . . . The effort to alleviate either misfortune more than fills a life time. Reluctantly, therefore, I have confined my activities almost exclusively to dwellers in the Dark Land.

By the middle of November Miss Keller and her companion were happily established with Polly Thomson's brother and his charming family at the Manse, outside Glasgow. The period covered is only a few months; in February she is back in Forest Hills where another test of her readjustment awaits her in the familiar surroundings of her life with her teacher. Her attitude here is, I think, the fullest tribute to Mrs. Macy's work. Miss Keller writes as any normal, warm-hearted person would write under similar circumstances. Little memories are painful; there are great emptinesses, but her life is by no means empty. Mrs. Macy tried never to let Helen Keller feel that she was different from others. Writing as she does, with varied and vivid images from acquired senses (though very rarely an auditory one), Miss Keller has fulfilled her teacher's ambition.

## Musicians in Paris

*CONCERT PITCH. By Elliot Paul. New York: Random House. 1938. \$2.50.*

Reviewed by THEODORE PURDY, JR.

**T**HOUGH they make music in both places, it is a long way from the Salle Gaveau in Paris to Cosme's café at Santa Eulalia. An equal gap of mood and manner separates this novel of Mr. Paul's from his memorable and forthright description, in "The Life and Death of a Spanish Town," of how civil war came to one Balearic island. The novel is a story of musicians in Paris, recalling the author's earlier pictures of artistic milieu in "Indelible" and "Imper-turbe,"—works which fluttered local dovescotes briefly over a decade ago. The plot resolutely avoids the ordinary conventions of fiction, and is nearly indescribable. Suffice it to say that it's all about a young pianist and his still beautiful mother, both expatriate Americans. A prominent Parisian critic discovers the boy, sponsors him in his concert debut,

and takes him to America for a tour. The narrator, who is also a critic, is in love with the mother, and glad to get the boy out of the way, though he is familiar with the somewhat unsavory reputation of his colleague. The mother marries her critic; the boy rushes back to France when he discovers the true nature of his mentor's interest. There follows a series of subtly arranged emotional conflicts, ending in the failure of the marriage.

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Mr. Paul lavishes his excellent style and sound knowledge of music, musicians, and Paris on this odd and improbable story. The book reiterates again and again the note of frustration, as maddening in its way as the "stratophone"

music invented by the modernist composer in the tale. The whole thing is ingeniously written and worked out with exceptional care, but in spite of some striking scenes and at least two remarkable portraits (the French critic and a Spanish woman pianist), it is not a first rate musical novel. The central figures remain unreal and the drama static.



Jacket design of "Concert Pitch."