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BRIEF REVIEWS

The Complete Poems and Plays, by T. S. Eliot. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952. 392 pp. \$6.00.

A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot: a Poem-by-Poem Analysis, by George Williamson. New York: The Noonday Press, 1953. 248 pp. \$3.50.

THERE are, more or less, twenty-nine published poems that Eliot has never put into his collected editions hitherto; they are also missing from *The Complete Poems and Plays*. Here they are unneeded, for although their inclusion would have made the title more accurate, the contents of this volume, Eliot's main output in verse from 1909 to 1950, are presumably the entire works for which posterity is likely to esteem him as a writer. Barring publication of the unabridged *Waste Land* manuscript, or of an improbable future masterpiece of drama (the forthcoming *Confidential Clerk*, or whatever, unless it far surpasses *The Cocktail Party*, will scarcely occupy this category), we are hardly to see the canon notably enlarged. Eliot's prose writings have been interesting mainly because of his proficiency as a poet; they do not, even those of thirty years ago whereby he became celebrated as a literary critic, promise enduring enchantment. But his poetry, now temporarily neglected by the young, may in due time, partly through the influence of the academics, find its permanent audience. That audience, we may hope, will not limit its praise either to the learning behind Eliot's poems, to the rhetoric and music of his verse, or to his philosophy of experience. It will be able to assimilate these as a single impression.

The future reader will be the more ready, because of the new collection, to contemplate the poetry not only as a manifold technical variation but as the diverse symbolic treatment of a few constant themes. Eliot has conserved his subject-matter so well that almost every major poem might be reduced to one bare formula: the tension between the real and the ideal, as envisioned in isolation. Many another poet has started with little more (this formula is the quintessence of romanticism). Accordingly Eliot has often been accused of writing the same poem over and over again. His actual development, however, is to be measured as a series of technical discoveries by which the formula achieves ever-different verbal form; a movement towards compression and multiplication of meaning in diction which shall be the most simple because the most precise.

Of the plays, *Murder in the Cathedral*, static and impersonal though its actors are, is certainly the best. As poetry it is Eliot's most polished work; as drama it is the perfection of a subordinate genre. *The Family Reunion*, successful as poetry, confuses the spectators; *The Cocktail Party*, a better play than this, is diffuse and threadbare in language. Eliot has never learned what a great dramatist must know: how to give to many voices the intense simplicity which he himself has many times given to one. A weakness in structural technique, evident in *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, and *Ash Wednesday*, infects his plays likewise. Structurally his best works are *Prufrock* and *Portrait of a Lady*. Yet his most vigorous combination of structural and emotional order is in *Burnt Norton*. The three other *Quartets* have less merit by comparison, but together with *Burnt Norton* they are Eliot's greatest poetry. The four give, like the greatest poetry of all, an "emotional equivalent of thought" into which, as a tenable view of man's place in reality, have been synthesized an aesthetic, a politics, a philosophy of nature and being, an ethic, and a theology. The proper analogy would be Pope's *Essay on Man*, Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, or Vergil's *Aeneid*. This is not to say that, not being epic in form, they can be epic in magnitude. But they are the twentieth century's nearest approach—though *Finnegan's Wake* may be close—to a comprehensive vision within the limits of a precise technique. For these poems and for the creative efforts preliminary to them, Eliot's complete poetry will be read.

In fairness to George Williamson's book of commentary on Eliot's poems, one must point out that it does not aim at showing a philosophic continuity. It is "a poem-by-poem analysis," and with some slight exceptions it avoids cross-references. Its method of tight paraphrase unembellished with important generalizations about the ideas puts it at the opposite extreme from such books as Matthiessen's, Miss Gardner's, and Maxwell's. To some extent Williamson's procedure is unassailable: Matthiessen and especially Maxwell are of little help to the reader laboring over an unfamiliar poetic idiom. Williamson helps clarify many obscure points which might puzzle a student. Thus he explains "I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled" by saying that Prufrock resolves "to be a little sportive in dress (by wearing his trousers cuffed)." A good reading, illustrating a peculiarity of English usage. Most critics have overlooked the interpretation; W. B. Yeats, however, in his *Autobiography*, felt moved to

identify *cuffed* trousers as trousers *rolled* like those of Mr. Prufrock! But Williamson's emphasis on paraphrase really misses its function, which ought to be to show how the details of a poem add up to a total meaning, a total effect. His treatment of "Whispers of Immortality" for example indicates that he just fails to see the central conflict there: between the unified sensibility which attains thought through the senses (knowledge of *death* in the sexual embrace—a fine conceit), and the disunified sensibility which attains thought only through the "dry ribs" of study and is afraid of Grishkin's warm sensuality. He fails also to see that this is pretty much the topic of Eliot's other poems in the same period—a fact that would be helpful to the reader trying to see "what Eliot is getting at." (Or perhaps he does mean this when he speaks of the "dual aspect of man"; but how is Eliot handling it as a concept in the different poems?) In paraphrasing, Williamson ignores also many ambiguities, for he seems to dislike such abstract notions as irony and paradox.

The quarrel with Mr. Cleanth Brooks in the introductory chapter is positively extraneous to the book. Such a work of specific criticism is not the place to enunciate a critical position: it is the place to apply a critical method. This kind of limitation is most important in a work manifestly elementary in scope, intended for an ignorant reader.

To Brooks (ironically) Williamson must owe a good deal. The chapter on *The Waste Land*, like every other such inquiry, must have been indebted somehow to that in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*. Williamson's cavalier attitude toward Eliot scholars is not palliated by his admission in the preface that "doubtless [he has] converted the substance of others to [his] own use." It is not enough to acknowledge occasionally; indeed it would be unnecessary to acknowledge at all, provided that the bibliography were comprehensive, as Williamson's is not. Some of the books Williamson does mention were published after the date of his preface, which is May, 1949.

On the whole this book gives little assistance to anyone trying to pursue the poems beyond the grammatical stage of meaning. What is initially perplexing in them may remain so after one has studied the analyses. Better scholarship is called for: why not at least get the dates of the poems straight? The discussion of *The Waste Land* is the outstanding part, though here too, perhaps because Williamson often contemns source-hunting, many tints and shadings escape his eye.—G.S.

The White Plague, by Rene and Jean Dubos. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1952. 277 pp. \$5.00.

Tuberculosis, by Saul Solomon. New York: Coward-McCann, 1952. 310 pp. \$3.50.

THE high dry Southwestern climate once lured consumptives by the thousands from Eastern cities to New Mexico and Arizona. During the twenties experienced travellers entraining in Chicago for the west were careful to request upper berths—to escape in some degree the percussion chorus of hawking and coughing from the inevitable quota of tuberculosis victims in the lowers.

As recently as the end of the war, old time Albuquerqueans could insist approvingly, "We'd never have been a city without tuberculosis." Ignoring the possibly contradictory evidence in local graveyards, this held some truth. A comparative handful of healthseekers conquered their tuberculosis and survived to become, often enough, business or political leaders in New Mexico and Arizona.

Today the curative virtues of the climate, which were in fact largely nonexistent, are played down. But we have inherited a heavy burden—Arizona leads the country in tuberculosis death rates, and New Mexico is second. These ugly facts have not inflamed social conscience in the Southwest, nor produced any effective demands for a public health cleanup. The tradition of indulgent and careless hospitality to disease is strong, but perhaps even stronger is the general impression throughout the country that medical science has licked tuberculosis.

The impression has a reasonable basis, for in the past decade doctors have possibly learned more about tuberculosis than in all previous medical history. The sure-death aspect of tuberculosis has almost disappeared. But the newest miracle drugs fall drastically short of being quick or certain cures. The rate of new cases shows little change, and each new victim still faces possible years of expensive invalidism.

Two books in the past year have been inspired by this changing but tenacious relationship between tuberculosis and its host, mankind. With only moderate duplication they bring the subject almost up to date.

Dr. and Mrs. Dubos, in *The White Plague*, have concerned themselves with the social matrix of disease, and they have rightly given much attention to the nineteenth century, when the stresses of early

industrialism gave tuberculosis its heaviest grip on humanity. Overcrowding, malnutrition, and overwork invited the disease, and no amount of social distance could prevent the widespread infection of aristocrats as well as workers. The Dubos' found it profitable to review a great variety of literary works, as well as purely medical documents, for historical information on tuberculosis. The authors are professional bacteriologists, thoroughly at home in their discussions of recent medical advances and the current status of biochemical research. More credit to them, then, for their equally careful presentation of the complex economic and social factors which are as much involved in human tuberculosis as is the bacillus. For readers grown impatient of DeKruifian simplicities and enthusiasms in popular medical writing, Rene and Jean Dubos offer balance, detail, and restraint.

Dr. Solomon's *Tuberculosis* is the most recent of Coward-McCann's Health Series books. It is thus to a great extent based on formula—the formula of the exhaustively expanded and all-inclusive encyclopedia article. Dr. Solomon is unconcerned with stylistic elegance, and the subject matter of his book often switches abruptly in the need to cover many topics. But the formula is justified, for it produces a wealth of useful and authoritative information.

Out of Dr. Solomon's prosaic chapters the curse of tuberculosis takes vivid shape. Consider the matter of home care of the sick, which sounds fairly simple, but is in fact a desperate measure, demanding coolie labor and penury and protracted self-denial from an entire household for months and years. Reading Dr. Solomon's methodical but heartrending instructions, we are moved to ask, "Must such things exist today?" The thorough doctor is ready in the appropriate chapter to answer yes, such things must be: "... there are approximately 120,000 beds for patients with tuberculosis, although there are about 500,000 patients with active tuberculosis."

Both books discuss the newest anti-tuberculosis drugs, and the newer forms of chest surgery. A growing number of authorities who consider pneumothorax outmoded will feel Dr. Solomon has given it too much attention, and many veterans will feel that he is quite uncritical in his lavish praise of the VA tuberculosis program.

These books carry a particular challenge for Southwesterners. Our greatest health problem is still with us, still disregarded, still the worst in the nation.—P.M.S.