

# POLYTROPIC POLYMATH

C. M. BOWRA: *In General and Particular*. 248pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 30s.

Any reader familiar with the Warden of Wadhams' style and method of presentation may well, before so much as opening his latest volume, confidently echo the lament of Mr. Henry Reed's wartime conscript: "And today we have naming of parts." He will not be disappointed. In a fairly slim volume of miscellaneous essays Sir Maurice ranges through languages, cultures and literatures with that omniscient and polyglot aplomb which has become his hallmark. The first entry in his index is "Achaean"; the last is "Zulus"; in between appear, among other topics, Confucius's *Analecets*, the Provençal *planh*, Racine, Tasso, Sordello of Mantua, our old friends the Kalmucks and the Kara-Kirghiz, and a fascinating people called the Narts, who appear to have been mythical Scythians.

Now the great temptation today, when knowledge is becoming increasingly specialized and fragmented, is to overvalue such omnivorous humanism simply for existing at all: there is, after all, an inherent glamour attaching to any critic capable of lecturing on "Poetry and the First World War" and illustrating his thesis with poems in German, French, Italian, Russian and modern Greek as well as English. The machinery is so superb that one tends not to notice the quality of what finally emerges from the production-line. This was particularly true of *Heroic Poetry*, which seems in retrospect a dull compilation, synthetic, repetitive, and full of deadly *longueurs*.

In *General and Particular*, however, shows Sir Maurice at his very best. His powers as a lecturer and conversationalist are legendary, but tend to be subdued almost to extinction in his major books, both living and long-dead, whom he so admires, there is some magic releasing quality about the spoken word. It is no accident, one feels, that most of the essays here gathered were originally delivered as lectures of one sort or another—in Oxford or Tehran, to the English Association, the Classical Association, or the Birmingham and Midland Institute. Here Sir Maurice's gift for exposition (as opposed to

critical theorizing) is kept vivid and immediate, as in the first essay, "Some Aspects of Speech", where a fairly complex linguistic argument receives the following illustration:

In my first year I once howled for my food half-an-hour before the right time. My Chinese amah wanted to give it to me, but my mother pointed to the clock and said it was too early, at which the amah said: "Maskee mississy clock. He no savvy. Baby clock, he inside tummy, he savvy." This delicate and scholarly statement shows how admirably the Chinese system of ordering words surmounts deficiencies which might seem insuperable to us.

Other essays follow a similarly expository line, and are logically grouped together: "The Meaning of a Heroic Age", which tells us more, and more memorably, in a score of pages than the *magnum opus* which preceded it; "Medieval Love-Song"; "Dante and Sordello"; and a pleasant vehicle for Sir Maurice's off-beat expertise, "Songs of Dance and Carnival", which deals with Lorenzo and Poliziano, the best of whose ballate "display that union of the medieval and the classical which was characteristic of the *Quattrocento* and accounts for much that is most attractive in it".

Sir Maurice's critical equipment is well displayed by two juxtaposed and contrasting essays, the first on Racine, the second on Edward Fitzgerald. The English, brought up on Shakespeare, tend to find Racine both circumscribed and frigid: as Sir Maurice says, "the strength and the limitations of Racine's style lie in his unshakable refusal to be lyrical." What is most striking about this analysis is the clear demonstration it affords of Sir Maurice's formidable and basic, equipment as a classical scholar. This is the logical equipment needed to place Racine: yet how many critics of French literature possess it? Similarly with the very different study of Edward Fitzgerald; it is the practised textual critic who sorts out draft versions of the *Rubaiyat*, but the broad-based humanist who goes to the heart of the matter and sees that what Fitzgerald took from Omar was an

ideology, an "instrument to speak of his disillusion and his distress".

But the oddest and most fascinating quality in Sir Maurice is one which, with typical English meiosis, he underplays whenever he can. It is no accident that he is always circling the idea of inspiration, the winged word, the spark that leaps gaps in our tidy logical patterns. His remarkable defence of an English classical education is permeated with this sense of the lyrical and the numinous; when he praises the virtues of classical composition one remembers his own *tour de force* in this field: a stunning version, in Greek choral strophe and antistrophe, of—*Kubla Khan*. He shows his hand most openly in "The Prophetic Element".

The rationalist spirit of our time has deluded us into believing that truth can be found only through proof and argument. This is certainly one way of finding it, but it is not the only way, and there are certain matters which lie beyond its reach. In our ordinary lives we all know how much we owe to sudden insight, to flashes of vision, to unexplained moments of confidence or foreboding. These are part of our human state, and we could not live without them. Nor is it difficult to justify our trust in them. They are in fact not irrational in the sense that they are against reason; they merely complement and help it. Nor are they instinctive, if by that we mean mere reactions to or that stimulus. They arise from experience and practice, and behind them lies much that we have forgotten just because we have made it part of ourselves.

It is this attitude, clearly, which makes sense and unity of Sir Maurice's infinitely varied interests; it lies behind his other declaration in this volume, that to do with the responsibility of the scholar: "In the end it is he, and he alone, who maintains continuity with the poetical past, who is responsible for seeing that the masterpieces of creative genius are not lost through neglect or falsified by prejudice or multiplied by ignorance." It is the Word, the Logos, which Sir Maurice serves; and if he occasionally feels he has to conceal that bright allegiance behind a barrage of multilingual showmanship or ruthless comparative fact-grubbing, his heart is nevertheless very much in the right place.



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## PREACHING POLYGLOTTISM

ANTHONY BURGESS: *Language Made Plain*. 186pp. English Universities Press. 21s.

This is an attractive book written by a man of letters who has right ideas about the importance of language in our changing world and who has had exceptionally wide opportunities of observing languages in action. As a graduate of Manchester University, lecturer in phonetics at a Lancaster training college, teacher of English in south-east Asia, professional novelist and critic, and author of a weekly television documentary, he draws upon his personal experiences at every turn. He has managed to acquire a working knowledge of the great languages, including Russian, Chinese and Malay. He states his thesis in plain terms: "As the world shrinks and the need for every educated man and woman to know foreign languages grows more urgent, we have to devise techniques for learning them quickly and accurately. Our best beginning is an examination of the nature of language itself."

Accordingly he arranges his book in two well-balanced parts: nine chapters on language in general and nine on languages in particular. Each of these chapters is happily conceived, from the first on "signals in the dark" to the last on "the future of English". The complicated origins of the world's one alphabet (with its numerous varieties) are most skilfully expounded and illustrated. In the chapter entitled "daughters of Latin" Mr. Burgess contrives to show the main phonological relationships between Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and French in little more than seven pages. His presentation of Pushkin's lovely eight-line idyll "Ya vas lyubit" with Cyrillic text, Roman transliteration, and English translation and commentary, is a masterpiece of lucid and succinct exposition.

In discussing such topical questions as the interplay between British and American English and the feasibility of spelling reform he shows sound judgment. He rightly insists on the utter necessity of using the symbols of the International Phonetic

Association in all serious language teaching. In the comprehensive school he sees better chances than elsewhere of encouraging gifted children to take up the study of oriental tongues.

Some slight misprints occur—Latin "alveolus" for "alveolus" (seven times), "casius" for "caseus"; French "escalve" for "esclave", "descendre" for "descendre"; German "Harz" for "Herz", "Woch" for "Woche"; and many more. There are also some factual mis-statements which can be easily rectified in a second impression. It was not "seventeenth-century pedants" who restored the *b* in *debt* and *doubt*, but Caxton and

## POETRY OF MOMENTS

R. H. BLYTH: *A History of Haiku*. Volume One. From the Beginnings up to Issa. 427pp. Tokyo: Hokuseido Press. Y.1,000.

Haiku signifies not just a short form of poem practised in Japan but, in Mr. Blyth's words, moments of vision, and in spite of the title of his new volume he quickly adds that "the history of moments is hardly possible". Of course he has worked to a plan beginning with the most ancient Japanese poetry, and due to end in his next volume, somewhere round the year 1920. So far his "History" brings us to the contemporaries of Wordsworth, who is among those non-Japanese writers called forth by Mr. Blyth to illustrate by example this mystery of haiku. He still, it seems, regards John Clare as the born haiku writer of England, and in his own quietly surprising way he offers us a ready guide to the Japanese tradition by quoting Clare: "The following, the final verse of *Autumn*, is three haiku:

The feather from the raven's breast  
Falls on the stubble leaf;  
The oriole on the old crow's nest  
Drop pattering down the tree;  
The grunting pigs, that wait for all,  
Scramble and hurry where they fall."

Indeed for the Western reader Mr. Blyth, who is an accomplished Japanese scholar and whose translations

Wynkyn de Worde in the fifteenth century. Our "sun" comes from older "sunne", not "sunu". The assertion that "in modern languages gender is not functional" is too sweeping; it would be more accurate to say "not always" or perhaps "seldom functional". That "the English *mess* in its military sense is ultimately derived from Latin *mensa*" is one of those absurd etymologies which were long ago pilloried by Skeat. It is unfortunate that two misprints appear in the six lines of *Beroul*, and an error in the translation. Our "scald" is cognate with French "échauder", not "échauffer". And finally, Karl Verner was a Dane, not a Dutchman.

are marvellously faithful and unalloyed, is much more, or other, than a capable historian or even anthologist because of his great variety of reading and alertness in apt quotation and allusion. His commentary on his chosen poems (he does not always choose on grounds of supreme merit, but so to say by way of completing the adventure into haiku-land) is always vigorous; it is also, where practical points call for explanation, workmanlike; and in addition he can summon up from his remembrance of countless books the enlightening name or excerpt. He is a humorist, or else much of the haiku world would have been passed by while he was—and he always should be—on his walks with the poets there. He has now a long row of books on Japanese verse and vision to his credit, and they all have the personal enjoyment which even historical anthologies are the better for; ultimately they are as close to daily life as Baconian essays. Incidentally the "History" is illustrated with facsimiles of the slight but demonstrative sketches which Japanese poets so often drew as the instant accompaniment of their manuscript haiku.

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