

WASTELAND TO-DAY

RECENT TENDENCIES IN THE ARTS IN ENGLAND

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THE world of fashion has yet to present us with an unmistakable Post War style. It is the same in the world of literature and the arts. Perhaps it is too soon after the war to expect a new direction. More likely, the whole cultural situation is totally unready for anything of the sort—the disorders in the house demanding a thorough Spring-clean before any fresh scheme of decoration can be entertained. In Britain at any rate, no outstanding creative artist has recently appeared with a new faith or any very surprising works. There is no counterpart, either, to Percy Wyndham Lewis and his "Blast" after World War No 1. and the rush of doctrinaire propaganda that made that energetic trumpeter outside the walls of Academic Jericho only one of many iconoclastic enthusiasts. One new ideology, Existentialism in its secularised French form, has indeed drifted across the Channel, but it has met no answering response. The voices that are heard in our "advanced" weeklies and monthlies, in the fugitive and the established organs of culture, are mostly the old voices, or younger ones talking in the familiar tones.

During this war there has been no remarkable development comparable to the passing from Rupert Brooke to Wilfred Owen, and then to T. S. Eliot, to take the case of poetry as representative of the change in the aesthetic outlook. Then, the old safe world had to be sloughed off and another world discovered, a Wasteland, which was nevertheless a Land of Promise. In what follows I shall use the convenient name of Wasteland to characterise what is loosely recognised as the "Modern Movement in the Arts." It is convenient because T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, appearing in 1922, is a fair example of the revolutionary technique, developed in every medium in the inter-war years, with its contemporary awareness, its assertion of the artist's right to create his own form (so galling to the normally indifferent layman), its obscurity tending to subjectivity, its cultural integrity. It illustrates post-war disillusion in an extreme form, yet its scepticism and faith-longing are integral to the whole movement. The symbolism of the title is also applicable to the wider field; for while the traditionalist dismisses

the venture as a futile poking about in a desert and laughs his head off at what he delights in describing as the inevitable Dead Sea fruits, Eliot and his fellows see the Wasteland as the actual world around us and they sweat to make it yield what it can. Better to grow a few thistles for our living donkey than to carve a marble pedestal (Classic or Gothic detail to taste) for the horse that died when he was taken out of his old environment. The true cultural problem of the inter-war years has been the mapping-out and planting-out of wasteland. Some crops have been produced, but methodical cultivation has hardly begun, and World War No. 2. has interrupted work rather than affected the soil.

In 1910 Roger Fry held the first exhibition of Post-Impressionist painting in this country. In 1917 came Eliot's *Prufrock*. England was doing her not unknown turn of waking up to Continental movements twenty or so years late. Bloomsbury became the rallying centre of the crusade to win Britain for Wasteland. Virginia Woolf, militant cultural suffragette, challenged the novel as it had become in the popular form of Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells. Roger Fry interpreted the "isms" of Paris. Clive Bell worked out his theory of "significant form" and found in representation the death-bring Siren of Western art. Ezra Pound, more conspicuously than his admirer and fellow countryman, T. S. Eliot, became the champion of new values in writing in the context of a new culture. Aldous Huxley wrote novels reflecting the mood of Wasteland, becoming a barometer of its self-consciousness, now assertive and cocksure, now unstable and doubt-ridden.

Painting, the art in which the modern Englishman is most profoundly uninterested and uninstructed, has always been the storm-centre of opposition to Wasteland. The Arts Council of Great Britain (successor to the war born C.E.M.A.¹) has had great successes on its musical side, but only one of its ventures in visual art stirred the country. That was the Picasso and Matisse Exhibition, where the public came in hordes to scoff and remained to jeer. As usual the artist, half consciously and half unconsciously, comments on the realities of the social situation and the spiritual atmosphere, and the painter's commentary hits the eye, while the writer's has to percolate through the brain. Every manifestation of Wasteland, however, when it is recognized is successful in rousing the "plain man" to right-

1. Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts.

eous fury and furious ridicule, simply because it shows the logic of the cultural assumptions he makes and is not prepared to face squarely. The constant theme of opposition to Wasteland products is: "I don't pretend to know much about art, but I know what I like." The obvious reply of the artist is that since art *is* his concern, whatever he creates will be what the plain man probably will not like. Yet, in his own better-informed way, the artist is likely to stand within the same limitations as the "plain man" and, because of his sensitivity, to emphasize these more patently. It was in the early twenties that Berdyaev saw in Picasso the final disintegration of Renaissance Man and the abandonment of exterior valuation of form based on anthropocentric standards. The breakdown of external authorities, of hierarchies of values and of spiritual beliefs has made Wasteland the home of subjectivity. The process can be seen very clearly in James Joyce, where the introspective preoccupations of his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* find shape in the "internal monologue" of *Ulysses* and end in the private language of *Finnegan's Wake*. Joyce is logical to the end. He says: "The demand that I make of my reader is that he shall devote his whole life to reading my works." Similarly, abstract painting passes easily into surrealism, the private search for impersonal form becoming the symbolic image of the individual psyche. A refusal to face the subjectivity that abounds in Wasteland to-day explains why so much of the "critical" writing that tries to justify or interpret Wasteland to the public is so barren and unintelligible and so vulnerable to attack on the level of common sense. Thus Pound's mighty schemes for a Wasteland culture were pathetically betrayed by his inability to translate the literatures he claimed to expound, and a recent commentator on Eliot² blindly admits to having thought his "Song for Simeon" had something or other to do with the second tribe of Israel, until the author suggested, "Try Luke II, 29".

Eliot typified the isolation of the Wasteland artist, sheltered behind literary allusion and esoteric reference from the philistinism of the crowds. The Wasteland Ivory Tower was really a lighthouse. Against it continual waves of protest, in the popular and cultivated press alike, raged in vain. This antagonism of artist and public was the more disastrous because England has never been accustomed to draw up fighting lines, on the

2. I am not competent to discuss music. But the case is similar so far as public reaction is concerned. A question put to the B.C.B. "Brains Trust" was whether the modern composer wrote notes at random on his manuscript. The old tale of throwing a paintpot in the public's face!

3. E. M. Stephenson, *T. S. Eliot and the Lay Reader*. London, 1946.

Continental model, under the banners of vocal and self-justifying schools. This was true of English Wasteland, in spite of the need to close the ranks. In a painter such as Paul Nash one can see the impact of all the "isms" as they came from Paris, but the blend is individual. The best known personalities in the visual arts, as Epstein, Wyndham Lewis, Stanley Spencer, and Edward Wadsworth, had little in common except the ability to shock the "plain man". Eric Gill was almost alone in descending from his aesthetic high-horse to justify the forms of his art over against the world that the plain man knew; and he did it only to renounce that world for a romantic medievalism. The result, exactly as with Morris before, has been to improve design in mass-production here and there (especially in printing). In the case of "arts-and-crafts" the plain man can be persuaded to see the use of the "crafts" half. The writing of poetry being suspect in itself, writing incomprehensible poetry was a slighter matter than carving or drawing "ugly" shapes, and so no poet shared the notoriety of an Epstein. Eliot's aristocratic disdain was the reply. Almost the sole figure to stand with Eliot was the post-war Yeats. The poetic nut growing in Wasteland soil got ever smaller and harder to crack.

The writers of the thirties tried to counter this isolation of art from society by the emphatic affirmation of creeds. Eliot himself turned to Christianity, a solution giving an order of values to the Universe, thus defeating subjectivism. As with Eric Gill, the Roman or Anglo-Catholic form of Christianity, with its emphasis on authority and on the Church as an organization, was the type most readily received. Michael Roberts, Charles Williams, Anne Ridler, and Graham Greene are prominent among those who have used Christian insight to evaluate Wasteland. The social implications of the Christian attitude are not unambiguous, however. So Eliot has written his *Idea of a Christian Society*, and not simply incorporated a social vision into his poetry. A more immediately popular affirmation in the thirties was Leftism, which found a rallying-point in the Spanish War, with Auden leading the poets. Like the brand of English moralism that has earned Britannia some uncomplimentary titles before now, this political bias was added to, and never really fused with, the practice of its exponents. Communism and near-Communism, popular in the thirties, was modified very greatly with the outbreak of the war, in face of the English Communist Party's attitude before Russia's entry. Writers of the Leftist thirties, as for instance Cecil

Day Lewis and John Lehmann, now spend themselves on energetic polemics against the Marxist limitation of art to social interpretation at the expense of private experience. Since Auden, poetry has flowed a little more freely, but hardly so that he who runs may read.

For reflecting the social situation, prose had an advantage that poetry lacked: it could reproduce the mass-mind. Hemingway's "dumb-ox" pattern, keeping within the vocabulary, subject-matter and mental range of a low-grade brain, seemed easy to imitate. So Wasteland fiction has tended to the extreme sensibility of the interior "stream of consciousness" or to the extreme brutality of the "slice of life". These two approaches have in common an anti-rationalism that results in a-moralism. The surprising similarity between Gertrude Stein's prose and that of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* comes from infantile tendencies encouraged in both, though for very different reasons. Revealingly, Gertrude Stein has the explicit object of doing in prose what her friend Picasso does in paint. English writers find it equally hard to avoid moral judgments and to write to a theory. Virginia Woolf managed by keeping close to the middle Joyce in method and developing feminine sensibility to its limits. The hard-boiled school has taken its inspiration from America.

E. M. Forster is one of the few Wastelanders who have combined sensibility with an objective narrative, but he is one of the few who, while not afraid to venture into Wasteland, also firmly root themselves in the Post-Renaissance tradition. (His attitude is shared by a handful of the older generation, by Walter de la Mare in poetry, and by the painter Augustus John). Generally speaking, the fragmentary, uncommittal impersonalism of the reporter holds to-day. Sensibility is harder to keep up and keep moving, while a reporter need not identify himself with his material and so neither his intelligence, philosophy or morals need be called to account. Christopher Isherwood made an original contribution by combining the impersonality of the reporter with the personality-parading of the gossip-column writer. "Chris" figured as the "I" of the narrative—a recognizably charming character, unattached enough to record life as he saw it without moral valuation, never drawn into compromising action, disapproving of violence, an Innocent Abroad, who was yet sophisticated enough to be "one of the crowd" with his characters. Graham Greene skilfully heightened the violence and a-moralism in his slum-and-criminal landscapes by preserving the reporter's impartial eye while introducing

Catholic values of damnation and sainthood. Then there was Mass Observation, beginning as a scientific social instrument (so it was claimed) but incidentally giving its adherents a chance to write essay-stories of the type common in Wasteland reviews. The popular exponent of surrealism, David Gascoyne, welcomed it as a new field for art. Here, in the newspaper realism of life as it is lived might be found the true wedding of art to society.

The world before the war seems very distant. Paper shortage hampers publishers and perhaps robs post-war Britain of the authentic voice of the new-born prophet. The interior monologue and the non-committal "raportage" of low life, however, are still the staple stock-in-trade of the "advanced" periodical. Poetry still wears an Audenesque bloom. The view of Picasso's war-time painting has not led to a new "ism" to startle our Graham Sutherlands or John Armstrongs onto a new track. Traditionalists and those who "know what they like" still write angrily to the papers about degenerate art. Nevertheless, it remains true that there are stirrings in Wasteland. There are hopes of a living English art, more fruitful than we have seen since the old patterns dissolved with the jolt of the Great War.

To begin with, Wasteland has come to stay. There were many critics who prophesied its rapid passing, like a horrid dream. The artist has gone far to prove that it was the philistine who was the dreamer and that the horror was in the realities we have by now experienced. The Wasteland artist's Ivory Lighthouse was no unnecessary refuge, though in the last resort inadequate. If art had got out of touch with society, was it his fault? The "plain man" may be unconvinced still; he may continue to dislike the products of Wasteland as much as ever, but they are all around him and cannot be escaped. The mannerisms of Wasteland have become unnoticed common-places in street architecture, newspaper advertisements, bathroom fittings, and on the cinema screen. The Londoner who gazes aghast at a private house by Maxwell Fry, accepts without a thought the unabashed tradition-flouting shapes of the new underground stations and makes no angry protest against the assertive Wasteland posters there.

There is, in fact, a vastly greater danger that Wasteland will be overlaid by Pseudo-Wasteland than that it will go down before the assaults of its enemies. Already the motifs of Wasteland architecture, wrenched from the context that brought them into being and vulgarized into a "style", have made our

cities uglier than ever by introducing a large, noisy child into the Babel of street-individualism, where each building is engaged in shouting all the others down. In the War-time Utility furniture, Gordon Russell, one of the foremost designers of modern furniture, was able to see his ideals introduced to the ordinary British family. The post-war reaction is likely to be away from the efficient simplicity of the utility designs to the extravagances, mock-antique or mock-jazz, which the trade believes to be the thing to meet public taste. Meanwhile, austerity living restrains these and other excesses. Yet while the "Britain Can Make It" Exhibition shows that designers have assimilated the constructive vision of Wasteland artists, another Exhibition in bombed Oxford Street draws crowds to a sculpture-piece by Jacob Epstein, to be goggled at along with a Living Wax-work, while loud speakers demand to know whether we are shocked or thrilled. Wasteland, which protested against the vulgarizing imitation of the art of the past, may soon have to direct its chief strategy against the vulgarization of itself.

The shocking-power of Wasteland is undoubtedly waning. True, the man who was distressed at an Epstein exhibition in 1936 is just as likely to be distressed if he goes to see the Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth exhibition this year. If he protested against Eliot he is not likely to relish Dylan Thomas. But there is now at least no justification for the abusive epithet "ultra modern". Even before the war a Van Gogh reproduction was considered a safe gift to be given with a suite of hire-purchase furniture. If not actually taking tea with the academicians, the Wasteland artist is eligible, if a painter, to become an Official War Artist, or, if a poet, to be put on a cultural relations job. A monthly of the class of *The Studio*⁴ has been accustomed from time to time to let the "plain man" make his usual sweeping condemnations or to give a gentle editorial rebuke to surrealism; this habit has never prejudiced greatly the selection of modern art in its pages. It is still possible to write a book with the thesis that post-impressionism and all that has sprung therefrom are a gigantic swindle manipulated by Jewish art dealers (indeed it has been done quite recently, in spite of the significant end of Adolf Hitler, who held the same conviction quite strongly); it is impossible not to make the case wear the logic of *Alice in Wonderland*. So that if there is a danger that Wasteland will become accepted only from below, through a distorted popular imagination, there is also the hope that it

4. Published in the United States as *The Atelier*.

will find legitimate recognition, through an intelligent public interest.

Public education in this direction is making real progress. A minority movement has always its ephemeral out-post publications; and if it is large enough it will have the kindly interest of progressive journalism. Wasteland has this and more. *The Architectural Review*, a leading publication, is Wasteland "plus". Weekly periodicals, such as *The Spectator*, *The New Statesman and Nation*, *The Listener* (a B.B.C. publication), and similar established papers take Wasteland almost as a norm. Survival of the war by a limited-appeal magazine, *Horizon*, edited by Cyril Conolly, shows that Wasteland has a well-defined place in the English cultural field. A different prospect is opened up by the steady publicity given to Wasteland poets and painters in *Picture Post*, which has one of the largest circulations among the popular illustrated weeklies. Then there are *Penguin Books*. Starting in 1937, paper-covered in a bold design that none of its imitators has been able to touch for simplicity and triumphant self-assertiveness, each book has a minimum printing for the first edition of 50,000 copies. *Penguins* cover fiction, biography, travel, and detection, while its pale-blue twin the *Pelican* takes under its wing science, philosophy, religion, art, criticism, and history. Though rising in cost from six pence to nine pence and then to a shilling, because of war prices, they have dominated the bookstalls through sheer quality. *Puffin Books* cater for the children; colour plates and stiff boards adorn the *King Penguins*; and the familiar format has been broken to give the *Penguin Modern Painters* (the British Wasteland School) and architectural studies, such as Ralph Tubbs' *Living in Cities* and *The Englishman Builds*. John Lehmann's high-brow Quarterly of the Auden period split during the war, to be diverted into the *Penguin New Writing*. Altogether the value of *Penguin Books* for Wasteland publicity must be estimated not in numbers alone, but in the accessibility and unpretentiousness of the familiar little coloured jacket. In contrast to the self-conscious propagandist volume or magazine, *Penguin Books* introduce Classic, Best-Seller and Wasteland Experiment with the same matter-of-factness that encourages intimacy.

The London Passenger Transport Board gave a determined lead in contemporary design, which, with likeminded attitudes on some private firms (Shell-Mex, for instance), has given rewarding scope for the Wasteland practitioner in visual arts. A less obvious but very powerful friend to Wasteland has been the B.B.C. This very English institution is attacked on all

sides as undemocratic, inefficient, partial, and snobbish; but, like London under the Blitz, it has proved its ability to "take it"; so that now newspaper critics have come round to the point of accusing it less of "uplift"—the old cry—than of not giving "culture" of the right sort. J. B. Priestley, who has become through his excellent war-time Sunday Evening Postscripts a kind of established interpreter of the "plain man" to the plain man, calls the new Third Programme too "high-brow" and not enough occupied with experiments in using the medium of radio. The three B.B.C. Programmes of Light, Home (on a regional basis) and Third are certainly ostensibly ordered to suit three levels of brow. In fact, they continue the B.B.C. policy of giving more or less what the public asks and also what it may listen to if it is not told too much about it. The Third Programme, created to give longer periods for opera, plays and features than could be dove-tailed into the previous two, has resulted in further prominence for Wasteland without canalizing originality within one wave-length. Of particular interest is the B.B.C. employment of Wasteland poets. To take only two who are now on the way to becoming household names, Louis MacNeice has been used extensively for original broadcast plays, adaptations and translations, and Dylan Thomas, coming first to read "talks" has stayed to become an actor.

High-brow stuff, says Mr. Priestley, is what "the public does not want". Mr. MacNeice, as a classical scholar and "obscure" poet, might well qualify as a high-brow, yet it is he who has made the most positive advance in declaring Wasteland open to the public, through his radio plays. The preface to the printed verse-play "Christopher Columbus" made two clear points: that radio drama must aim to catch the largest audience possible and that the spoken voice over the air can allay the general prejudice against poetry. The impossibility of creating a living poetic drama in the contemporary world was Eliot's concern already in 1920 (*The Sacred Wood*). Auden and Isherwood attempted it in the thirties, taking perhaps Eliot's suggestion that the way might be found through using the music-hall tradition. Eliot himself took the harder way of straight tragedy in *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Family Reunion*. It is interesting that this vexed form should be MacNeice's way of escape from the Wasteland artist's solitary and subjectivity-encouraging lighthouse.

But the move toward this reconciliation of art and society has been going on in a modest way since before the war. John

Piper, for instance, gave up purely abstract painting for an interest in typographical recording which links him firmly, if remotely, with one great tradition of English draughtsmanship. The Euston Group led a way—rather a hazy way—back to that realism which Wyndham Lewis, that old stager, was beginning to advocate as the next move. The latter's own gesture of reconciliation, a "naturalistic" portrait of Eliot, was rejected by the Wasteland-conscious Royal Academy. The war, with its Official War Artists and its demand for direct reporting, had disappointingly few positive results, except with the already established idioms of Edward Ardizzone, Eric Ravilious and the Polish Felix Topolski; however, Henry Moore came out of Pure-Sculpture-Heath in Wasteland to draw life in the shelters. Since then Moore has compromised with the common vision enough to carve a Madonna and Child for a Church. To-day the most widely acclaimed of the new painters, Geoffrey Tibble, has passed through the Euston Road Group and his most obvious affinity is with Degas, not Picasso. Gertrude Stein is proud of claiming for Picasso the liberating vision that "the twentieth century is not the nineteenth century, not at all." That dictum is no longer considered the sole and self-justifying truth.

In poetry the move away from subjectivism, noticeable in Eliot himself and in the Leftism of the thirties, made a decided advance during the war. This time there were no cosy illusions to upset or any glow of romance round the coming of war. Rather it brought home to the poet the fact of individual suffering and the nightmare destructiveness of our technological civilization, of which the Wasteland artist was already aware though inadequately prepared to face. In his *Guernica*, Picasso showed fear invading the subjective territory, without any constructive antidote. The poetic expression of individual feeling in Arthur Keys, Roy Fuller and Laurie Lee was placed against the objective background of service or civilian life. The war poets often reached a directness and ease unusual in Wasteland by accepting identity of emotion with other disturbed individuals, with the common basis of loneliness, insecurity and dread. Alun Lewis came near to this poetic universality, and Anne Ridler achieved it triumphantly.

The poet is usually the flying straw that reveals the direction of a changing breeze. If so, the criticism of the contemporary situation—not externally, as in the politico-moralities of Auden, but from a total world-view—betokens a re-orientation of theory and practices. Auden, when he left England

moved, like Aldous Huxley, in the direction of a religious and mystical viewpoint. If there is a predominant preoccupation among Wastelanders at present, it is not aesthetic so much as moral. Stephen Spender comes back from defeated Germany certain that the conviction of the free-will in the individual to build for righteousness is the urgent need. Rex Warner, one of the brightest of the younger novelists, writes a condemnation of those who, in creating Wasteland, found it necessary to create a moral desert also. Edith Sitwell's *Shadow of Cain* has moved very far from her former word-patterns and nursery-rhyme variations to contemplate our post-war atomic age of uneasiness. This breaking in of the moral problem is more than a perennial English tendency. It is the end of the "art for art's sake" attitude, which Wasteland never seriously challenged when it defied the world in which art had become a superfluous decoration.

I believe that it has been justifiable to speak of Wasteland as if it were a real entity, even in so individualistic a country as Britain. It has in fact stood over against the national life, feared, championed, puzzled over, compromised with, denounced. It has isolated the artist and led enthusiastic theorists into unintelligibility or excessive over-simplification. The creative work done to-day does not mark Wasteland out ever more clearly. The critics who used to toe the Wasteland party line are now becoming doubtful of the orthodox position; Eric Newton, for instance, preaches to-day that the departure from representation in painting has been loss as well as gain, while John Betjeman rejects the theory of "functionalism, the criterion of beauty" as "a little old fashioned". Subjectivism has been frowned upon, tradition brought back into the picture. It is the time for a new synthesis. It is unlikely that architects will create more novel forms than Tecton, that writers will out-Joyce Joyce, poets start more private puzzle-hares than William Empson, or artists court abstraction more devotedly than Ben Nicholson. Our genius for compromise has blurred Wasteland's outlines all the way through, yet it has retained its identity and its isolation. The process of bringing Wasteland within the boundaries of the "plain man's world" is not alone one of the education of the public to accept it, but also demands a change in the entire cultural horizons. Wasteland has been mapped out as far as human settlement can go, perhaps further. What is needed now is cultivation until it can blossom like the rose, though not exactly in petals of the same sort so assiduously cultivated in the English suburban garden.