

POET AND PEDANT

THE ART OF T. S. ELIOT. by Helen Gardner. Cresset Press, London. English price, 12. 6.

(Reviewed by James Bertram)

THIRTY years ago Mr. Eliot threw out a coy challenge:

*C'est à grands pas et en sueur
Que vous suivrez à peine ma piste*

In the non-stop run of hare and hounds that followed he brilliantly outdistanced his commentators, and much honest sweat has been dropped on the Cambridge Backs and along campus trails from Washington to Maine. The field was further confused by the poet's habit of appearing at intervals among the critics and issuing false directions. But the end of the chase, if not altogether unforeseen, was still a riddling kind of orthodoxy—

*Because one has only learnt to get the better
of words*

*For the thing one no longer has to say, or
the way in which*

One is no longer disposed to say it.

Though his beliefs had crystallised into comparative stability, Mr. Eliot's technique and poetic invention remained as mobile and startling as ever. His final fate (like that of another notable literary heretic of our time, André Gide) has been to become a classic in his own lifetime.

Today no English poet enjoys a comparable prestige, or has exercised so sure an appeal over three literary generations. But canonisation took time, as those who have grown up with Mr. Eliot's reputation will remember. In 1922, when *The Criterion* was being launched, Katherine Mansfield wrote to



THE REV. P. O. C. EDWARDS (above) will review "In Journeyings Often," by Dr. J. S. Moyes, in the ZB Book Review session on Sunday evening next, February 26. Other books, and reviewers will be—"Moonshine and Moses," by "Sinbad" (Norman Berrow); "Granada Window," by Marguerite Steen (Christine Cole); and "Once Upon a Time," by Vaughan Wilkins (Pat Lawlor). Elsie K. Morton will be in the chair

a friend in Sydney: "I think *Prutrock* by far and away the most interesting and the best modern poem—it stays in the memory as a work of art." But many early admirers were baffled by the mood and liturgical style of *Ash Wednesday* and the poems of the 'thirties. Religious conversion was not then very chic, politics were the mode, and Mr. Eliot's politics wore a forbiddingly authoritarian air. The publication of *Collected Poems, 1909-1935* (including some short pieces firmly labelled "Minor" that gave the first surprising hint of Old Possum) was the signal for renewed attempts at assessment: one American critic, summing up on yet another expatriate lost to Europe, announced simply, "Mr. T. S. Eliot, it is now clearly seen, is a Minor Poet."

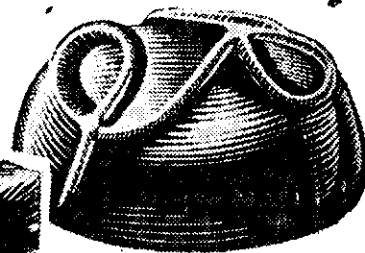
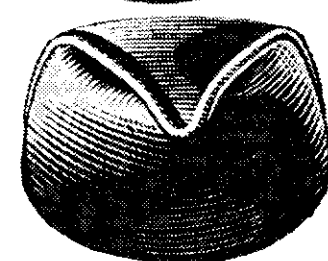
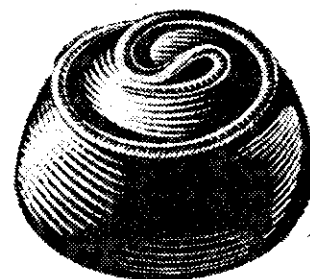
But the 1936 volume contained already *Burnt Norton*, the first of the quartets; and by the time the third of these, *The Dry Salvages*, had appeared, Dr. F. R. Leavis (a scratch man in the Eliot paper-chase) was firmly declaring: "It should by now be impossible to doubt that he is among the greatest poets of the English language." After the Nobel Prize came an O.M., and an almost embarrassing range of published tributes to mark his sixtieth birthday. But while the literary world was unanimous in its approval, it seemed that Mr. Eliot's final quartets might yet have to wait as long as Beethoven's for general acceptance and comprehension.

It is with the *Four Quartets* that Miss Helen Gardner begins and ends her full-length study, and perhaps she is right in maintaining that here the poet speaks more directly and to a wider audience than in much of his earlier work (though all these terms must remain comparative). If Mr. Eliot has suffered in the past from the New Criticism he can hardly complain, for he is himself largely responsible for it—just as he is responsible for having changed, almost single-handed, the reading tastes of a couple of generations of students and teachers of English. But Miss Gardner's is the sort of book for which Mr. Eliot, as well as all those to whom his work still presents considerable difficulties, can only be grateful: it is enthusiastic, sensitive, informed, readable, and really helpful. It opens with an analysis of Mr. Eliot's original contribution to English versification, continues with a discussion of the music of the *Quartets* and the problem of communication, reviews in some detail Mr. Eliot's poetry since *The Waste Land*, and concludes with a chapter on the content and meaning of the *Quartets*, seen against all that has gone before them as Mr. Eliot's poetic masterpiece.

The verdict? As we might expect from so discreet and self-effacing a critic, it is restrained and yet unequivocal. T. S. Eliot is presented as a visionary poet whose complete work has a symmetry that only the late appearance of the *Quartets* has enabled us wholly to grasp. "His unique distinction among English poets is the balance he has maintained between the claims of his vision and the claims of his art." Some may quarrel with that "unique," but few will disagree with Miss Gardner's insistence that "he is neither a prophet nor a visionary primarily, but a poet, a great maker." Finally, we are told, "there

(continued on next page)

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