

THE
ESSENTIAL
REBECCA
WEST

UNCOLLECTED PROSE

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Essays



THE NOVELIST'S VOICE

Transcript of radio broadcast, BBC RADIO 4, Sept. 14, 1976

When I wonder how I found my voice as a novelist, I am mortified to find how little I can claim to possess such a thing as a novelist's voice. I have published only five novels, and I have been writing since my adolescence, and am now 83. But I know that had I been able to do what I liked, and that is just what I have not been able to do, I would have written nothing but novels. Fiction and poetry are the only way one can stop time and give an account of an experience and nail it down so that it lasts for ever. All other forms of literature yield opinions and facts. But an account of what one sees and hears and feels and tastes and the emotional judgements of those sensory events, and the establishment of the relationship of those findings to the rest of one's life; that one can only do in a novel or a poem.

The exact rendering of experience was what I wanted to do from an early age, because from the moment I looked around I was made familiar with the uses of literature. There was a lot of the stuff lying round my house. As a family, we had the advantage of reading very quickly and remembering what we read, and the talk of our parents joined on what we read to our lives. My father had the great advantage of having as tutor a famous Frenchman, Élie Reclus, a geographer and

early vulgarisator of science, and ultimately a prominent figure at the Free University in Brussels. He had been engaged to teach my father and his brothers by their widowed mother, who met Reclus when he was an exile in Dublin. She was Anglo-Irish, and an impassioned member of the Protestant Established Church, which the English foisted on Catholic Ireland, and she assumed that any French person who was a refugee from France must be a Protestant in flight from the wicked Catholics. She was wrong. Reclus was an Anarchist and had gone into hiding because he and some friends had seized the Town Hall in the course of a rising against Napoleon III.

He accepted the post quite innocently, without any attempt to deceive, because she had told him she was a member of the Plymouth Brethren, and he had imagined that this was a small revolutionary body. When he discovered the truth he behaved with great correctness. He said nothing. He liked my grandmother, he liked her sons, and he thought he could teach them better than the next man, and he made it a rule never to recommend to them any idea of which their mother might disapprove; and there was forged a bond between them which never broke. My father used to tell the story with a chuckle, which became to me the sign of his appreciation of the random nature of human life, and the queer ways human beings counter it and impose a kind of order. Out of bigotry my grandmother had engaged the best possible kind of tutor for her sons, in fact the tutor most likely to prevent them from growing up bigots themselves.

This anecdote still rings in my ears and so does an anecdote my mother used to tell. She had in her youth been courted by a man so rich that his name was used over quite a large area as a symbol of riches. They went on a picnic-party, there he proposed to her, and she accepted him. But on the way home he realised that he had left his umbrella on the site of the picnic, and made such a fuss, was so seriously grieved, that she realised that he was not the husband she wanted, and the next day she broke off the engagement. What was valuable in this story was her candour about her emotions and her refusal to let it come to rest on a romantic falsity. Yes, she had rejected a philistine, but she wasn't, she owned, really a heroine. She saw that

Reviews



THE GREEK WAY

*THE CHALLENGE OF THE GREEKS, by T.R. Glover,
SUNDAY TIMES, Aug. 23, 1942*

For some occult reason, the story of the relations between the Early Church and the Roman Empire is told in our schools almost exclusively from the lions' point of view. This encourages masochism in the young and is not in consonance with the facts, which present us with a picture of a brilliant and sensitive and audacious group of Christians, stimulated to the point of inspiration by the new ideas of their teachers, taking over power from the limp hands of pagans who were perishing because their minds were growing on exhausted soil. That story, and the story of a time extraordinarily like ours, a cruel and terrible time testing the spirit in a thousand ways, is delightfully told in a book by Dr. T. R. Glover called *Life and Letters in the Fourth Century*, which was published forty years ago but should not be forgotten. It makes very good reading today. The analogy with our own times is cheering, though it is an analogy between grief and grief, because we are here to see it. The fourth century looked like the end. It was a beginning.

To many, the name T. R. Glover on a cover must recall that book, but he has written forty others. He is an indefatigable populariser of the classics. The volume he has just published, *The Challenge of the Greeks*,

is particularly interesting to women, for a certain peculiar reason. To be born a female brings upon one many curious and interesting experiences, among the less publicised of which is the asymmetrical system of classical education prevalent in girls' schools. Many English and Scottish schoolgirls study Latin nearly or quite as industriously as their brothers, but are taught no Greek at all.

In *The Challenge of the Greeks*, Dr. Glover tells us, in one essay, just what we have missed in not learning Greek, and in another how people ought to be taught Greek to get the best out of it, and in another what is the essential contrast between the Greek and the English way of conducting life. The docile ignoramus in search of instruction from initiates is bound to think that these essays are just what he, or more probably she, wants. But there are far more slips between pen and reader's sympathy than there ever were between cup and lip; and though other essays in the volume bring back the hankering for a full classical education, these particular ones, designed for that purpose, in fact repel it.

They raise the shocked surprise we so often feel when scholars, after showing the most delicate perceptions, the most infallible taste, show actual dullness of palate when they sample the real life around them. In a rumbling admonitory style, not sufficiently precise, Dr. Glover alleges that we should study ancient Greece because the Greeks were highly individualised, and our modern world is standardised to the point of soulless monotony. "We go," says Dr. Glover, "to schools of one type; we read newspapers of one type; as for books, we read best-sellers or none..." A complaint ought to be a little truer. Do we all go to schools of one type? The admirable schoolmistress in my own village, as well as netting a nice lot of scholarships, teaches her pupils to sing "the sailor with the navy blue eyes¹." She rightly feels that, as they are going to sing this in any case, they had better sing it well. This is not done at Winchester or Roedean. Many such sensible adaptations of the educational system have come my way, and I have not searched for them. And surely nobody could mistake one of our newspapers for another, though an error of another sort has been known to arise in connection with them. In the days when newspapers were vast and