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BARBARA DEMING

John Osborne's War Against the Philistines

IN THE APRIL ISSUE of *Harper's Bazaar*, Mary McCarthy hails the British playwright John Osborne for his war against the Philistines, and implies that all those who fail to applaud *Look Back in Anger* or *The Entertainer* belong stubbornly in that camp—complacent ones who would rather not be disturbed. Mr. Osborne, she says, is obsessed with waking these people up: the two plays are lively descriptions of contemporary Hell. I share her enthusiasm for Mr. Osborne's rare talents, but I think that he merits a more severe appraisal, and that she congratulates him in just the wrong terms. The two plays are lively descriptions, I think, that falter; and that falter precisely because that battle for which she salutes him distracts him from his vision.

Miss McCarthy takes up arms beside him. She attacks in particular those who are critical of *Look Back in Anger*; lumps them all with Helena, in the play itself, who feels that the hero, Jimmy Porter, should learn to behave like other people. Jimmy's jibes, she declares, "are a therapeutic method, designed to keep a few people alive, whether they like it or not." In disposing thus scornfully of all criticism either of the playwright or his hero, I think she does John Osborne injury. Implicit in his plays, and weakening them, is a like consignment to oblivion of those who will not attend to him. It is, in fact, a fatal affinity that brings this brilliant writer to Mr. Osborne's defense; for if her brilliance is sometimes marred, it is scorn that mars it; and she encourages in him the same shortcoming.

What actually are the grounds an audience has for finding Jimmy Porter provoking? Miss McCarthy would have it that he "thinks too much and criticises too freely." She likens him in this to Hamlet: "Both . . . have no fixed purpose beyond that of awakening the people around them from their trance of acceptance." But in drawing this comparison, she ascribes to both heroes too rational a behavior. She does add of Jimmy, after speaking of his therapeutic activities, "This, at any rate, is what Jimmy thinks he is doing." But the qualification is inserted lightly. She also notes that neither hero wholly wills the events he causes—that both are driven to destroy everything in sight. Strange therapy. Are these heroes, then, themselves so wide awake? If audiences are unsympathetic to Jimmy, it is because Mr. Osborne, too, would have us take the hero at his own evaluation. Is it not for the playwright to cut beneath what people *think* they are doing, to what truly moves them; to make this visible, and all its consequences—and thus to show, in Hamlet's famous words, "the very age and body of the time his form and pressure"? But Mr. Osborne's handicap here is visible in the very phrases with which Mary McCarthy praises him. The person of the author and of the hero

are interchangeable in her remarks—the anger of the one and the anger of the other, the supposed fixed purpose of the one and of the other. And Helena, who finds fault with him on stage, is interchangeable with anyone in the audience who is critical. Miss McCarthy aptly notes that Jimmy would exact complete fealty from those who enter his life. But instead of illuminating for us this impulse in his hero, Mr. Osborne would, himself, exact fealty to him—exact it of us or let us be damned. (For as Miss McCarthy notes too: “The play almost asks to be misunderstood—like an infuriated wounded person.”) This pressure on us, to take Jimmy at his word, an audience properly enough resists. *Not* to do so would be to sit in a “trance of acceptance.”

She likens Jimmy to Hamlet. Is Hamlet’s fixed purpose to awaken those around him? Surely Hamlet has no fixed purpose—though prompted to it, as he says, by Heaven and Hell. “This visitation is to whet thy almost blunted purpose,” the ghost chides him. And he chides himself, “How stand I then, /That have a father kill’d, a mother stain’d, /Excitements of my reason and my blood, /And let all sleep?” He cannot “force his soul” to a fixed purpose, because his too-fixed bent, throughout the play, is, helplessly, an irrational one. “Who this has seen. . . /Gainst Fortune’s state would treason have pronounced,” recites the First Player in a passage Hamlet specially requests. And treason of this sort is, unhappily, I think, Hamlet’s preoccupation. For to him fortune is “outrageous fortune.” From his first soliloquy, “Oh that this too too solid flesh would melt,” he is willing the impossible. He wills “not to be” in the world as given; given “a father kill’d, a mother stain’d,” times out of joint (yet not to die, since death itself may be troubled by bad dreams). One gathers from the ease with which Laertes, after *his* father’s murder, stirs up the crowd, and from all Claudius says of Hamlet’s popularity, that had his fixed purpose really been to awaken the people around him, he might have done so without great difficulty, and taken Claudius’ place upon the throne—had the truth Miss McCarthy says he would waken them to been something he himself could accept. Is the play he has the visiting players stage, for example, really a piece of therapy designed to rouse the court? Or is it not, rather, the device of one who cannot bear what he knows to be the truth, and so asks the question again: is this really the truth?—asks it, to postpone facing it? It is because he is moved not by fixed purpose but by irrational impulse that Hamlet causes events he does not will. “If Hamlet from himself be ta’en away,” as he himself says—and uses the image of shooting an arrow over the house and hurting one’s brother. All his energy is bent, helplessly, to willing fortune not to be what it is.

It is this unreasonable attempt that makes him universally sympathetic; for the impulse is one with which every man is acquainted. (In the last act of the play, when Hamlet returns from exile, he writes to Claudius: “. . . you shall know I am set naked on your kingdom”—a phrase strangely charged, for it suggests the newborn baby, and brings to mind rebellion against the very fact of being born to man’s condition.) But add, too:

Hamlet is sympathetic because we are allowed to see him clearly. The irrational impulse that torments him is illumined for us steadily—through the vision of him others have, through his own insight, through the course events take. (“How all occasions do inform against me,” he himself observes.) We see that impulse work itself out to the end, in all its destructive consequences.

What really moves Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*, if it is not the high mission that Mary McCarthy suggests? Here is a sketch of the play:

Jimmy, the young working-class intellectual who has married Alison, a colonel's daughter (against the protests of her family), for all his education, is running a sweet stall. He feels that there is no real place for him in this “American age.” He spends much of his spare time jibing at Alison's former world, which he thinks she has not sufficiently rejected. She still can't bring herself to feel the way he does about things, she admits. He declares of her mother: “That old bitch should be dead! Well? Aren't I right?” But Alison still writes to her mother. He names her former friends his natural enemies. But she lets them visit. “A monument to non-attachment,” he calls her—“Pusillanimous . . . the Lady Pusillanimous . . . That's my wife . . . Hi, Pusey.” “I don't think I can take much more,” Alison tells Jimmy's friend Cliff, who lives in the same building with them. She also confides to him that she is pregnant and does not dare tell Jimmy for fear he will think this a betrayal too. When Jimmy learns that Helena is coming to visit, he tells Alison, “Oh my dear wife, you've got so much to learn . . . If only . . . something would . . . wake you out of your beauty sleep! If you could have a child, and it would die.” When Alison even begins to attend church with Helena, he tells her, “One of us is mean and stupid and crazy. Which is it?” Perhaps, one day, she'll see things his way, he tells her. “I want to be there when you grovel.” Helena urges Alison to leave Jimmy, and finally she does. (“All I want is a little peace!”) But then it all happens just as Jimmy had imagined it to himself: she has her baby; the baby dies; Alison, ill and humbled, turns up again.

In the meantime, though, Jimmy has started living with Helena, who after slapping his face one day has suddenly opened her arms to him. When Cliff, who doesn't like Helena, tells Jimmy he is moving away, Jimmy tells him he is worth a dozen Helenas to him, but he has to try to get from her what he knows she is unable to give. “Either you're with me or against me,” he begs Helena; “don't let anything go wrong.” When Alison turns up, she insists that it is not to claim Jimmy; she does not believe in the divine rights of marriage. Helena tells her that she is talking like Jimmy now; hadn't she said that she could not believe in him? Well she, Helena, realizes that she must leave him; she can't be happy hurting someone else. Jimmy tells her that she hasn't the guts for loving, then. Exit Helena. Jimmy cries: “Was I wrong to believe that there's a kind of burning virility of mind and spirit that looks for something as powerful as itself? . . . I may be a lost cause, but I thought if you loved me, it needn't matter.” Alison cries: “It doesn't matter! I

was wrong, I was wrong! I don't want to be neutral. . . . I want to be a lost cause. I want to be corrupt and futile! . . . I'm grovelling!" He takes her in his arms.

Here, surely, is a man in no condition to minister to those around him—a lost person, without a world of his own, as he says; suffering in a void, and impelled—as Miss McCarthy herself notes (without realizing that she undermines her own characterisation of him)—to “equalize the suffering”; impelled to find for himself company in that void (especially the company of one from that dying world he feels has hurt him). In another recent play, Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, a character employs the image “Like the solitary child who turns himself into children, 2, 3, so as to be together. . . in the dark.” The image applies to Jimmy.

Yes, it is a lively vision of Hell, as Miss McCarthy says. But it is a confusing vision, too. Because Mr. Osborne is unwilling to allow that Hell deforms his hero. Ophelia speaks of Hamlet's “sovereign reason / Like sweet bells jangled out of tune.” Hamlet says of himself, “My wit's diseased.” But Mr. Osborne is leery of admitting any testimony that Jimmy Porter's actions are not healthy and wise. And for this reason many in an audience who would otherwise find him sympathetic enough, look at him askance. Instead of affording us the chronicle of an irrational passion, the play takes virtually the form of a case stubbornly argued for its hero. Question for the jury: “One of us is mean and stupid and crazy. Which is it?” One after another, all the other characters are brought to testify in Jimmy's behalf. Helena for a while bears witness against him, but, characterized as she is, Jimmy can declare, when she contradicts him, “That makes my point”; and her subsequent declaration of love undermines all her professed objections to him. Alison asks Cliff:

“Do you think he's right. . . about. . . oh everything?” Cliff does. Even Alison's father decides that Jimmy has a lot of right on his side; he even admits, when Alison tells him what Jimmy thinks of *him*, “Perhaps Jimmy's right.” “Right”—the word recurs like a musical leitmotif, announcing, always, Jimmy. As for Jimmy's view of himself: Miss McCarthy writes that both he and Hamlet suffer from self-doubt—“though this is clearer in Hamlet's case.” It is clearer indeed. He does once almost apologize to Alison—explaining that he hits out at her because he wants her so much. He does almost apologize to Cliff, for letting him go away—explaining that he has to try to get something from Helena that he knows she cannot give. But at the end of the play, he names the quest that torments him and others the natural quest of a burning virility of mind and spirit. After all the testimony to his rightness, we have little reason to suppose we are not to take his word for it. The very order of events unfolds in the pattern of a daydream the hero himself has dreamed, in answer to that question he himself has raised. The curtain goes down on the dreamed-of verdict: He is right; Alison is wrong. (It is as though in *Hamlet* the scene with his mother ended the moment she said, “O Hamlet. . . Thou turnst my very eyes into my soul, / And there I see such black and grained spots. . . .” Curtain, before the ghost can enter and

chide Hamlet. It is as though the whole play ended with a variation of Ophelia's mad scene, in which she appears, in distraction, before him, and tells him: If you are mad, I want to be mad, too. Instead of advising her, "Get thee to a nunnery," he has told her he hopes her father is murdered too, and it makes a human being of her.)

The vision that *Look Back in Anger* affords is partial in the word's full sense. Put through their paces as witnesses for Jimmy, the characters have often little reality beyond that. What really moves Helena at various crucial moments, for example, is anybody's guess. Mr. Osborne never reveals much more to us about any of the characters than Jimmy himself bothers to remark about them. The play is, in effect, written in the first person. Cliff seems to us very real, because he seems so to Jimmy. Jimmy himself is always wonderfully vivid to us—yet unknown, too, as a first-person hero is who avoids self-examination. At the play's end, he has what he has been asking for. Now that he has it, is he gratified? Or appalled? If the curtain were to go up again on some subsequent Sunday afternoon, what should we see? I am curious as to what Miss McCarthy would say.

In *The Entertainer*, she says, the enemy is identified with the "men of Suez" and "this, being a political grievance, is easier for an audience to sympathise with. To be angry about politics is conventional." Thus again she tags all possible criticism of him as Philistine. But I think the real reason why audiences find this play less provoking is that it does not have the aggressively first-person quality of *Look Back in Anger*. In *The Entertainer*, three generations in the family of Archie Rice, music hall comedian, are shown in lively and subtle relation to each other; and none seems simply the projection of one character's imagination. This is a very much richer play than *Look Back in Anger*. It is, I think, an extraordinary play. And yet in *The Entertainer*, too, Mr. Osborne fails to let the drama he has set in motion take its full course. And again it is because he is obsessed with pointing out to us who are the right people (or as Archie calls them, the "real people"). Again he is distracted by his compulsion (which Miss McCarthy lauds) to tell off the Philistines. He so obscures the play with which he really starts that Mary McCarthy, in describing *The Entertainer*, can discount its family scenes. For her, everything happens in those scenes in which Archie Rice is seen on the job, "gamely doing his act." The link with Suez, she says, is strained in the home scenes (where word that Archie's son is fighting in Egypt seems a little arbitrary), but here it becomes real: an audience instinctively catches the equation between an actor keeping the show going and a soldier holding the fort. She speaks particularly of one moment in which Archie is revealed before a tall nude wearing the helmet of Britannia—"like a recruiting poster." "His fading personal fortunes are eerily identified with the fading of the Empire." She likens the play to Shaw's *Heart-break House*. Political caricature is brilliantly achieved here; but it constitutes, after all, little more than a moment's comment. There is a very much more substantial life to the play than this—in the tradition of Chekhov rather than Shaw.

There are curious parallels between *The Entertainer* and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (from which I have already quoted). View the two side by side, and the real drama in *The Entertainer* becomes more visible; the irrelevant elements Osborne has allowed to obscure it stand out in sharp relief—above all, his battling insistence that his heroes have problems which the rest of humanity is not likely to appreciate. Mr. Osborne has Archie Rice declare of his family, “We’re deadbeat and downandouts . . . why, we have problems that nobody ever hears of . . . we’re so remote from the rest of ordinary everyday human experience.” The scene on which the curtain rises in *Endgame* is at first glance remote indeed from the everyday. In a bare basement room God knows where, with two tiny windows high up, and out those windows “zero zero zero—nothing stirring,” live: old Nell and Nagg, side by side in two ashcans; their son Hamm, crippled and blind, stuck in a big throne chair; and Clov, Hamm’s adopted son, who still gets about enough to wait on the others, but whose legs and eyes already bother him—deadbeat characters certainly. The effort of *Endgame*, however, is clearly enough to sharpen in us the sense of a *familiar* plight. (Beckett’s plays are usually spoken of as highly intellectualized constructions; but actually they set a kind of life in motion before us that is, if not natural, then a comic fantastic imitation of the natural—of the all-too-everyday.)

Both plays feature three generations—their respective attitudes toward life strikingly parallel. “It’s all over, finished,” Archie’s old father, Billie, laments. “You haven’t lived, most of you. . . don’t know what life can be like.” “Ah yesterday!” cries Hamm’s old mother. This generation likes to recall at length the way things used to be, and is requested at intervals to be quiet. “Bottle him!” Hamm will yell (and Clov puts the covers on the garbage cans). “Oh go to bed!” his family tells Billie, more affectionately. The next generation speaks words that are almost identical. Archie: “I’m dead behind these eyes. . . don’t feel a thing. . . . Nothing really touches me. . . . You don’t think I’m real, do you? Well, I’m not.” And Hamm: “I was never there. Absent always. It all happened without me. I don’t know what’s happened.” Their children level against this generation a harsh accusation—that they are criminally careless of the lives of others. (“All those I might have helped,” Hamm mumbly admits. Archie admits nothing—when Jean tells him he will be the death of his wife and of his father, he merely retorts, “Go on, insult me.”) The third generation hungers for escape. Clov complains that there is nothing to do here but watch his light fading. And Archie’s son Frank complains to his sister, “Don’t kid yourself anyone’s going to let you do anything or try anything here, Jeannie. . . . Who are you—you’re nobody. You’re nobody.”

The Hell described is essentially the same in the two plays (that Hell lightened in *The Entertainer* by considerably more mutual affection, but in *Endgame* by the much greater insight of its characters). It is so much the same that one could actually transpose many speeches from one play to the other, without disrupting effect. At random: from which play is the

following taken: "yesterday . . . that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day"? The real life of each play is essentially the same—as one watches them all try to get through those bloody awful days somehow. In *Endgame*, Hamm calls regularly for his "painkiller." In *The Entertainer*, much gin is consumed. Mutual torture provides relief of a sort. ("I *haven't* made you suffer too much?" Hamm demands of Clov—"shocked," the playwright specifies. For Hamm is more aware of what he is doing than Jimmy in *Look Back in Anger*.) And in both plays, too, all believe in putting up a show. Archie: "If you learn it properly, you'll get yourself a technique. . . . You see this face. . . . It can sing, and tell the worst, unfunniest stories in the world. . . . I have a go. . . . I do. I have a go." Hamm: "I've got on with my story. . . . I've got on with it a little, all the same. Technique, you know." In both plays it is forever "party time" or "story time." "Sing one of your songs, that's a good boy," or "go on, love, have a go," they encourage each other in *The Entertainer*. Some of the truly wonderful moments in that play are those in which the family rouses itself out of sodden gloom with some bit of vaudeville, and they all, in turn, "have a go." In *Endgame* the picture is more stark. Family spirit is lacking. Clov is not a willing audience for Hamm, nor is his father, whom he sometimes bribes with a sugarplum to listen. For all of them, "it's slow work." ("What time is it?" "The same as usual.") In both plays, there is a wonderful sense of this, as they all try to fight off the conviction that they are nobody, nobody—to fight off the terror of this, and the boredom. Here is the real drama presented us (a drama, note, akin to the real drama which Mr. Osborne blurs in *Look Back in Anger*). They are alone in the universe, Jean complains; there's no more God, and they have only themselves. The same complaint is made in *Endgame*: "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" "Not yet!" And the life of the play is their desperate attempt to believe that *they* exist. "Why this farce day after day?" Clov asks Hamm. "One never knows," Hamm replies; could they possibly be beginning to mean something? Archie tells Jean that he once saw hope and strength in the face of an old Negro woman, who was singing her heart out to the world. Anyone who could stand up and make a pure, just natural noise like that, there's nothing wrong with them. But, he adds, he will never be able to make that kind of "beautiful fuss" himself. Behind all the show he puts up, lies the terror that it is quite meaningless.

When Mary McCarthy describes Archie up before the curtain, doing his act, she describes him as listening, intent, for the patter of applause which will assure him that he is still there in the spotlight—that he still exists. She says, very aptly, "All the clichés of the stage. . . take on in this play a quality of sheer horror." Yes, but the family scenes, too, belong in this vision. *The Entertainer* is not just a play in which the figure of the old pro struggling through his act affords us a political caricature of the fading British Empire. In less abstract fashion, the stage clichés of which she speaks illumine the everyday life of a particular family. Here lies Osborne's real art.

This illumination, however, is fitful. There is a great deal of plot to *The Entertainer* which I have hardly hinted at and of which Miss McCarthy complains that it is "clumsily messengered in," by telegrams, newspaper stories and so on, so that it carries little conviction. The trouble is not that it is messengered in—which is the way, after all, in which, with convincing enough effect, much of the plot is unfolded in a Greek tragedy. The trouble is that most of it is irrelevant—is merely battle with the Philistines. In waging this battle, *The Entertainer* follows the pattern of *Look Back in Anger*. The play starts as Archie's daughter arrives for a visit (for she has been living apart from the family). They promptly raise the question of whether she feels allegiance to them any longer. They assume that she probably does not, would rather be back in London with her nice proper young fiancé. "Aren't you glad you're normal?" her father taunts her. At the start of the play she asks naïvely, "My own people—who are my people?" But by the end of the play—like Alison—she has come to know who they are. In the next but last scene of the play, her fiancé tries to patch up a quarrel they have had, and asks her to marry him right away. He tells her proudly that he has quite a decent career lined up. He could not have said anything more fatal. She turns him down flat, to stay with the family. *Her* people, she realizes at last, are the downandouts. (In a matching scene, Archie rejects the help offered him by his successful lawyer brother, who will pay all Archie's debts and keep him out of jail—to which he is in danger of being sent—if Archie will accept a certain job in Canada. Archie tells him he prefers jail—where he is sure to meet people he knows. Departing, he carefully insults his brother.)

Even this extraneous drama is a drama of blurred outline. Halfway through the play, Jean makes shocked accusations against Archie. By the time she takes her stand with her own kind, how has her outrage been resolved? What does she think of her father? One does not know. It is easy to forget to ask, because another plot element has been introduced that distracts one from such questions. If the two scenes of telling-off the Philistines supposedly resolve this play, this other plot-line provides most of the big curtain effects throughout. At the end of Act One, Archie, fighting tears, tells Jean he has just had word that his youngest son has been taken prisoner in Egypt. At the end of Act Two, word comes that the boy has been killed; Archie staggers to his feet, howling a blues song, and bursts into drunken sobs. In spite of the magnificent acting of Laurence Olivier, these moments which are given particular dramatic stress are oddly unaffected. Or rather, that they are is not odd, for what Archie really suffers, he has complained, is the fact that nothing any longer touches him. A climax of *feeling* is a false climax in this play. It is false in a double sense. The news of the death is introduced just after Jean has made her first accusations against Archie. Again, the pattern recalls *Look Back in Anger*. That play contains a weird moment in which, in reply to sharp criticism from Helena, Jimmy abruptly informs her that as a boy of ten he had to watch his father die. That, we are apparently sup-

posed to feel, puts *her* in her place. Later, in reply to another attack upon him, he is able to inform her that he has just returned from watching at another death-bed. (Shortly after this, Helena opens her arms to him.) The introduction of a death which grieves the hero serves in both plays to relieve the playwright of the necessity of bringing him face to face with himself.

Yet of *The Entertainer* especially it can be said that it is toward some moment in which the hero must confront himself that the whole play properly tends. Underlying all Archie's fussing, and all Hamm's, is the nervous dread of being left, finally, to himself—no murmur from a responsive audience rising any longer to give him reassurance. *Endgame* does move doggedly toward that moment. Hamm's parents die, Clov finally manages to leave him, and Hamm is alone. "Discard"—he throws away various comforting objects—among them the whistle with which he used to summon Clov—and, stoically, faces the silence. *The Entertainer* almost ends in a comparable scene. We see Archie for the last time up in front of the curtain, going through one of his numbers. He falters; his wife appears out of the shadows, holding his hat and coat, and we see that the drop curtain has vanished, the darkened stage is behind him; they walk off together. The moment is filled with a kind of terror; but the nature of the terror eludes one. What is Archie's sense of himself finally? How much, for example, have Jean's accusations bothered him? We cannot tell. All we really know is that he prefers himself, Archie Rice, to his brother. He has made that very clear. And it is clear enough that we are supposed to, too. (After describing the brother, in the playscript, Mr. Osborne taunts: "If you can't recognise him, it's for one reason only.") Archie does not remain, here at the end, to confront the silence. Instead, he returns for a moment to tease the audience: "Let me know where you're working tomorrow night, and I'll come and see *you*!"

No, it is a disservice to John Osborne, I believe, to congratulate him upon his war with the Philistines. Behind the smoke of this, he is actually taking cover. Instead of submitting his heroes to a final clear scrutiny, he turns to taunt: Oh, aren't all of you out there glad you're normal? Mr. Beckett puts in Clov's mouth the observation, "Nobody ever thought so crooked as we"; but neither Jimmy Porter nor Archie Rice makes any such admission; and Mr. Osborne seems unable, even to himself, to make it about them. He would paint a modern Hell. But he would if he could, damn only those who supposedly "don't know what it's like" for his heroes. If he could find the courage to examine the human heart without distraction—putting aside an anger that is really a complacent snobbery of his own—then his plays might indeed awaken us.

"The man," says Albert Camus, "who, as often happens, chose the path of art because he was aware of his difference, soon learns that he can nourish his art, and his difference, solely by admitting his resemblance to all." These are words for John Osborne to ponder.