

Dr Davie's monograph gives a quite fascinating account of the way in which the English writers of the first half of the eighteenth century were influenced by the science of their day, with its generally mechanistic bias, and shows how many of the epithets which they employ and which to us have a somewhat archaic and literary flavour were in fact part of the normal contemporary scientific terminology. He also demonstrates how the ambiguity of such words as 'spirit' led to constant and largely unconscious oscillation between materialistic and idealistic conceptions of human existence and activity. Dr Cardwell's 'case study in the application of science', as he aptly calls it, provides a most instructive illustration of the way in which technological advance, even when it is furthered by such practical and hard-headed persons as Savery, Newcomen, Watt and Boulton, depends upon an intuitive grasp of the scientific questions involved, which one might perhaps describe as a kind of theoretical knowledge 'by connaturality'. He also shows, from Watt's firm opposition to the development of the high-pressure steam-engine, how even the greatest original geniuses can on occasion be unexpectedly conservative and obstinate.

This is an admirable series and one can only hope that future volumes will rise to the high level of those that have hitherto appeared.

E. L. MASCALL

THE DARK COMEDY: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy, by J. L. Styan; Cambridge University Press; 30s.

The starting point of Mr Styan's book is that traditional theories of tragedy and comedy are no longer adequate 'to identify and explain the characteristic tone of modern drama'. As a general statement, this is likely to pass unchallenged, nor will many readers need Mr Styan's rapid tour from Euripides to Molière to convince them that earlier plays, too, often defy simple classification and are best approached on their own terms. However, having warned us against playing Polonius with labels, Mr Styan produces his own label—a single label, albeit with two names on it, designed to describe the work of playwrights as diverse as Chekov, Tennessee Williams and Samuel Beckett.

What, then, is 'dark comedy'? Mr Styan does not give us a simple definition, but the most characteristic feature seems to be mixture: a mixture of elements in plays demanding a mixed response. Thus he sees his dramatists making a conscious bid for a variety of reactions from their audiences, inducing a succession or even co-existence of different attitudes, judgments, or emotions. Further—and this is a more testing criterion—Mr Styan sees the audience of 'dark comedy' left at the fall of the curtain not with the comfort of any kind of moral solution but in uneasiness and perplexity. With such wide terms of reference, Mr Styan goes doggedly searching for examples. Naturally, he finds them. At best, the search leads to illuminating discussion of vital and central themes in Pirandello, an author who seems to fit the various premises of 'dark

comedy' so well as to suggest that Mr Styan used him as a model. At worst, we find unhelpful if not misleading snippets of dramatists who seem to be included from a questionable desire to be all-embracing. Only 'overt propagandists', it seems, fail the test completely: thus Graham Greene, in spite of *The Compliant Lover*, is one of the very few authors to be dismissed, though Brecht and Shaw are both included. Why?

Mr Styan's criterion seems to emphasize the presence, rather than the purpose, of certain techniques: for instance, he notes the presence of ambiguity whether it be central and basic, as in Pirandello, incidental and strictly subordinate, as in Chekov, or completely unintentional and accidental, as in Brecht. This is to make a superficial and unhelpful category, and to make 'dark comedy' as dangerous a yard-stick as the traditional terms it aims to replace. Granted, both Pirandello and Chekov demand of their audiences a continual adjustment and re-adjustment of their sights, but in *The Cherry Orchard* complexity is used to bring deep understanding and ultimate clarity, while in *Henry IV* complexity leads deliberately to perplexity and chaos. Granted, both Shaw and Anouilh sometimes amuse themselves by driving their audiences to one position after another, setting off a detonator under each, but less important than any similarity of technique is the distinction between the didacticism and scepticism of the one, and the anarchy and cynicism of the other.

That Mr Styan fully values such substantial differences is clear when he allows himself space for considered and exact analysis of individual plays, but unfortunately he seems urged to generalise at all costs. By the time he reaches his final chapter, he is aiming to synthesise his varied findings and is speaking of 'dark comedy' as though it were a fully fledged form. Here the successive arguments seem to spring less from the plays which have been discussed than from the critical theories the author embraces. And, since Mr Styan wishes to explain the characteristic tone of modern drama, it is at least odd that he concentrates so much on the manipulative side of the dramatist's art, and has so very little to say on their social attitudes: the various elements of 'dark comedy' which Mr Styan describes often offer rewarding lines of approach to different authors, but what we really want to know is what we find when we arrive. Otherwise, we might as well classify *The Winter's Tale* and *Marriage à la Mode* under the same heading. Whether the heading reads tragicomedy or comic tragedy doesn't much matter.

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