DELIGHT AND TEARS

THE APPLE OF THE EYE. *By Glenway Wescott. 12mo. 292 pages. Lincoln Mac Veagh. The Dial Press. $2.50.*

I SHALL not forget the feeling of astonishment and—shall I say?—well-being with which, some months past, I read the opening of Glenway Wescott's Bad Han when it appeared in THE DIAL.[1] Within three sentences Mr Wescott had established his mood, a mixture of ruggedness and lyrism. The abrupt change from these four lines to the name of his heroine served to clinch his effect. Here, in the purest sense, was action. For such movements, it seems to me, are the essence of action in art.

Mr Wescott's novel, The Apple of the Eye, is a continuation of the story Bad Han as it appeared in THE DIAL. The novel has a kind of tripartite arrangement, in each part the focus being placed upon a different character, while the parts are held together by certain parallelings and interactions of plot and emotion. The first part is the story of Bad Han; the second centres about the love-affair between a delicate young girl and a farm-hand whose wanderlust is temporarily quieted by his attachment to this girl. In this second part a young boy, Dan, has been brought into the story; the third part now settles upon this boy, but treats him in the light of the parts preceding. One feels the reward of Mr Wescott's method: the story does have a cumulative effect, and the ending is made richer by its strong reliance upon what has preceded.

All of which is very vague, and in no wise conveys the quality of Mr Wescott's story. It is a book almost exclusively of emotional propulsion. Indeed, it even becomes a drenching in emotions, those softer, readier emotions which we designate usually as "feminine," an experience purely of "delight and tears" (to borrow one of his chapter heads) and is thus a kind of revival in letters, an atavism, albeit a revival which is done with such force, such conviction, that one is caught unawares, and before he knows it is deeply involved in these partings (by death or locomotion),

[1] January and February, 1924.

this girl like wilted flower left to perish, these stutterings of love, the sleep-walking in the moonlight, the call, or lure, of the city over the hills and plains. The machinery of pathos is well utilized—which, once again, fails to convey the quality of the story, for it is so obvious that the author did not think in terms of the "machinery" of pathos. His book, if it makes few demands upon the intellectual equipment of the reader, is a profoundly appealing piece of emotional writing, or one might better call it an emotional *experience*, for the reader's participation in the author's plot is intense enough to leave him in possession of the story's overtones much as one is left with the overtones of some dream or some actual event which has occurred in one's own life.

The principal objection I find to Mr Westcott's book is its failure to widen the field of our aesthetic perceptions. And I use the word "aesthetic" very broadly here, to signify simply all perceptions which engage what Goethe calls the *organs* of art. Such perceptions are of two categories: method, technique, discoveries of procedure within the medium itself; and the far more important discovery of symbols which adequately summarize for us the emotional and ideological complexities in which we are involved. In method, Mr Wescott's chief contribution is the bringing of a greater and more sensitive vitality to a type of book in which the typical novelist could feel very much at home. In subject-matter, the author has re-seen for us certain stock figures and situations of the contemporary story, re-seen with a keener eye, but no new angle of vision.

Yet this in itself becomes a kind of virtue. Our latent familiarity with the mould sets us for it so perfectly, that when Mr Wescott does his act with such vigour we are able to follow him without a wrench. There is a point whereat the average suddenly transcends into the natural, and at times Mr Wescott seems rewarded by precisely this illumination, so that his book becomes something of a racial experience, adjusting itself with sensitiveness to our desires for both satisfaction and frustration. The greatest book ever written will probably be so for the same reason. And it is here that Mr Wescott is rewarded for having kept the commandments, and the law as the apple of his eye.

There are certain writers who, in addition to the absolute values of their work, have for me a sort of barometric interest. Such

writers, for instance, as Joyce, Eliot, or Cummings, always strike me as facing an issue, as being on the verge of some new decision. I speculate on what they will do next. I feel this way also with reference to Wescott. Will his next book be a continuation of his present one (The Apple of the Eye ends as the somewhat autobiographic hero leaves the farm for college, and thus it could be projected into further volumes of the same sort); or will it, in some form or other, suffer that strange critical deflection (an equivalent to epistemology in philosophy?) which has started so many modern artists through some personal migration parallel to Joyce's curve from Dubliners to Ulysses?

It might be said that if Mr Wescott chooses to repeat his present formula, we may expect him to repeat it with that creative vitality which he has already displayed. Yet the issue is much deeper; perhaps it is just as hard to-day to retain one's fire in the fidelity to artistic orthodoxy as is the case with religious or political orthodoxy. This is no mere accident; it is the result (both the flowering and the absurdity) of that modern specialized manner of living whereby art itself tends to become the predominant experience of the artist (his keenest hours being devoted to the perceptions of technical procedure and his weaker hours being left for the perceptions of life in general) so that he makes extensions and discoveries within his field of experience which are simply unseen by specialists in other fields who have not paralleled his experience.

But to return—Mr Wescott is of a much more highly critical temper than his first book would seem to indicate. He is, therefore, by no means immune from the Dubliners-to-Ulysses temptation. While on the other hand the brilliancy of his first book would certainly justify him in trying to develop in the avoidance of more specialized channels.

In any case, we may for the time being content ourselves with this opportunity to welcome a work of such keen emotional appeal and stylistic vigour as are displayed in The Apple of the Eye.

KENNETH BURKE