THE WANDERING ELDER[1]

BY DESMOND MacCARTHY

[This article is a review of Mr. C. K. Munro's new play, *The Mountain*, which has just been produced in London. *At Mrs. Beam's* and *The Rumour*, by the same author, established his reputation as one of the most promising young British dramatists.]

The Mountain, Mr. C. K. Munro's play, which the Stage Society performed on Sunday and Monday last, is a very long but not a very helpful play. 'The theme is the conflict between authority and freedom, both in the life of the individual and as embodied in the struggle between despotism and democracy in society. It is the story of a man of immense powers, and how he came to discover the only way in which such powers can be rightly used; and of a people, and how alone they can find freedom.' So runs the description of it on the publisher's wrapper, covering more completely than most 'blurbs' the intentions of the dramatist.

Now what is your first reflection on reading such a summary? That the author of *The Mountain* has probably flown higher than he could roost? You are right.

When some day my hours are numbered and a few young dramatists are gathered round my bed to catch the last whisper of the old critic, it is not likely that I shall be able to convey the sum of my long theatrical experience. Far more probably I shall only be able to pant out a hint or two. 'You cannot think too much, or feel too much, or attend too closely to technique.' (I can picture the glances of disappointment at this commonplace.) 'Though thinking may take away again the themes it has suggested, and feeling often make you foolish, and technique use up your time. But' (here I shall rally my remaining strength), 'but *if*, after thinking and feeling about life as profoundly as you can, you are inclined to express ultimate wisdom through the mouth of a "Wandering Elder" — don't. I will go further. I implore you, in that case, to scrap and begin again.' I can imagine this emphatic injunction, if not attributed to a wandering mind, provoking the eager question, 'But what *is* a Wandering Elder?'

'A Wandering Elder, my children,' I shall reply (you see I am optimistically projecting this sad scene far into the future), 'is a figure born of an earnest imagination, impressed rather than inspired by its theme. It is not uncommon for prose writers and poets to turn themselves into Wandering Elders. When projected by a dramatist the Wandering Elder is usually a pale old man with a fuzz of silver hair and the vague but hopeful gaze of one in the habit of seeing through stone walls. He is usually dressed in a garb which at once suggests no denomination and all denominations. He speaks slowly and with great forbearance. He is without fear. He has passed beyond this dim spot, the world, but presently he will reveal — in the last act — its secret. Master of himself, he is master of others, especially in argument; for his spiritual power is nowhere more clearly shown than in preventing objections to his views which occur to the audience from rising to the lips of his interlocutors on the stage.

'In short, the Wandering Elder is a Bore. But that is not why, my children, I warn you so urgently against him. He is a symptom, a sign, that however

[1] From the *New Statesman* (Radical-Labor weekly), June 5

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earnestly and enthusiastically you have envisaged your theme you have not plumbed it. That is why I implore you, if you ever find your imagination tending to create a Wandering Elder, to scrap your work and begin again. Mr. Shaw — you remember Mr. Shaw, Bernard Shaw, G.B.S.? — had a near shave of creating a Wandering Elder in the shape of Keegan in *John Bull's Other Island* — a near shave. I am too weak now to explain how he avoided it. Shaw was a very remarkable man. We journalists used to call him "inimitable." "Indispensable" would have been a better word. He had lived honestly, — superbly honestly, — tried this way out and that way out, and kept his courage and his laughter free; and having lived through many predicaments, he got to understand how one kind of man came to consolidate himself in one position and another in another without wanting to push on. He saw round Father Keegan as well as Broadbent and Larry. I see you don't even know what characters I 'm talking about. Well, Shaw did n't want to refute Keegan, but he saw round him — understood how much Keegan left out. And this is the point — the Wandering Elder is essentially a figure his creator has *not* seen round. He sums up; he is the incarnation of the author's own uncriticized aspiration, and—heavens! how invariably, how unutterably, he lets us down! Beware, beware, my children, of the Wandering Elder.' At this point I shall allow myself to sink back upon the pillow.

Mr. Munro's play is unfortunately dominated by a Wandering Elder, and, of course, the wisdom he dispenses gets us no further. And, since events in the play are more or less arranged to bear out the Wandering Elder, even when probabilities are strained in making them do so, I have not a good word to say for *The Mountain* as a whole. Passages in it are excellent, and types in it are amusingly and vividly drawn (Bolckow, the labor leader with 'twenty-five years' experience as revolutionary leader,' the Grand Duke with his absorption in astronomy), but the technique is very cumbrous. Cumbrousness, too, was the fault of *The Rumour*, which was, however, a far better play. *The Rumour* was a better play because the scenes and their sequence had greater plausibility, and because it was an analysis of war psychology and not a play which aimed at revealing the ultimate significance of life. It was more modest in scope, and nearer, though not very near, to fact in actual statement. Mr. Munro describes *The Mountain, or The Story of Captain Yevan* as 'a symbolic drama.' Now when a dramatist does this it is a shy way of saying, 'Don't, please, suppose I 'm such a fool as to think this is the way things actually happen. Only if they did happen thus it would be easier to understand them.' We reply that it certainly would be. But, while we may appreciate any subsidiary excitement or humor which such a play may offer us, we must perforce lose interest in its theme. What really interests us is to see what the nihilistic and superb idealism of a Wandering Elder comes to when brought up against actual fact. We know that people with a turn for professional preaching, whether on paper or by mouth, can earn a living by dispensing vaguely ennobling doctrine, sometimes a good living, sometimes a mere pittance; but what we want an artist to show us is what happens if all proceed to act upon that doctrine.

This Mr. Munro does not do. Mr. Munro's story is a story of a young aristocratic officer who knocks his orderly about for a wager, is justly reproved by a Wandering Elder, and, after being told he is a coward to hit a

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defenseless man and that he dare not punch a monk, punches a monk. The result of this is a court-martial, before which the defense does not make half enough of the provocation. The presiding officer, instead of saying to the young Captain Yevan, 'You are a very silly young man to have allowed yourself to be provoked into a technical assault upon the Church by this silly old soul-saver,' sentences Yevan to a heavy fine or degradation to the ranks. Yevan chooses degradation, and, unable to stand the humiliation of being knocked about, strikes an officer, is flogged, becomes a revolutionary. An industrial lockout leads to half a dozen workmen being shot by soldiers, and that to a social upheaval. Yevan rides the storm; the civil revolutionary committee — the T.U.C., so to speak — is flotsam for a moment on the top of the wave, and is soon engulfed. Yevan finds himself faced with the problem of bringing order out of chaos. He has two comrades, different revolutionary types — Zasha, a Jew, whose doctrine is that if you believe men to be good they become good, and Denkin, who believes the social order must be entirely destroyed and that thus out of complete chaos a better world *may* grow. Both in different ways believe that it is hopeless to try to control a revolution. Zasha is shot, asserting no man is cruel enough to shoot him; Denkin is imprisoned by Yevan. Yevan, imbibing the doctrines of the ex-Chancellor, governs as an autocrat.

Then the Wandering Elder again crosses Yevan's path and points out that he has failed to give the people freedom. Yevan is a Lenin who has substituted a new tyranny for an old one; he has moved a mountain and sat himself upon the top. He has failed because he has yielded to the instinct to dominate. Prompted by the Wandering Elder, he surrenders his authority to the popular assembly, who throw up Bolckow, who throws down Yevan.

We soon hear the jingling of the carriage bells of the returning Archduke: the *status quo ante.* Yevan is discouraged. The Wandering Elder explains that, though he has failed to conquer freedom for men, he has achieved the only conquest possible — conquest of himself. Men must be ruled by authority; the only authority which leaves them free is the Voice of God within them. He must become a preacher. And what does that Voice say? At this point, much more interesting than any other, the Wandering Elder failed us.

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South African Dutch

Afrikaans is the name given to the Dutch dialect spoken in South Africa, which differs widely from the Nederlands tongue used in Holland. The fact that it resembles Flemish more closely than it does the native language of Holland disposes of the theory that it is merely a provincial patois. To be sure, the sources of its vocabulary are mainly Dutch, but it also includes words from German, French, English, Portuguese, Hottentot, and Malay. No less than three quarters of a million people in South Africa speak and write this hybrid language, which is taught in schools and used in public documents.

Where Afrikaans is at its best is in folk poetry and popular songs. The following verse shows what a contributor to the London *Outlook* is pleased to call 'the irrepressible high spirits of the backveldt.'

> Tarara-boom-de-ay,
> Oom Paul het 'n vark gerij,
> Af geval en seer gekrij,
> Op geklim en weer gerij,
> Tarara-boom-de-ay.

Omitting the untranslatable first and last lines, this exquisite little offering means, 'Uncle Paul rode a pig, fell off and hurt himself, climbed up and rode on again.' But when a bunch of the Boers really get together to make a night of it, they do not stop here. Likely as not, one of the more playful members of the party will burst out with, 'Bobiaantje klim die berg (The little baboon climbs the mountain),' 'Ag, Oom Erasmus, se tog ja (Oh, Uncle Erasmus, do say yes),' or even, if he is very far gone, 'Daar's sij weer, daar's sij weer, met haar rooi rokkie (There she is again with her little red skirt).'

Luckily, not all South Africans are quite as frivolous as these gay lyrics might lead one to fear. Soon after they had been gathered into the fold of the British Commonwealth of Nations, ex-President Reitz published an anthology of sixty-two Afrikaans poems, the earliest of which dated from 1875. The President himself was something of a bard, and played a prominent part in the movement to preserve his native language.

The best of the South African poets is Mr. Jan Celliers, who fought through the Boer War, traveled in Europe afterward, and then returned to his native veldt. The English find his verse rather too sentimental, except when he is describing nature. Poets writing in Afrikaans have the doubtful advantage of being able to experiment with a new language, and, though their efforts cannot be compared to the best European literature, they are quite as respectable as similar attempts in the dialect of Scotland.

The whole business, however, reminds one somehow of the French clown Grock, who on being addressed in English asks his interlocutor why he is speaking Spanish. The man informs him that it is not Spanish but English that he is speaking, whereupon Grock demands, with outraged naïveté, 'Pourquoi?'

Epstein Again

Not content with baiting the British public with his statue of Rima in the

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