

It is bewildering that Clark's final chapter, "Strategy of Change," abruptly shifts to a discussion of the civil rights movement. Clark summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of the movement, touching on one or two matters relevant to the ghetto—school boycotts, demonstrations. His focus, however, clearly is the civil rights movement of Martin Luther King, SNCC, and the March on Washington. While this movement may be slowly turning toward the ghetto and grappling with its problems, Clark's discussion lacks any clear attempt to relate the lessons of the movement to

the unique needs of the ghetto. And while Clark alludes to the need for civil rights movements to join with other groups with a comparable interest in social change, he neither develops this idea fully nor relates it to the specific problems of the ghetto.

Clark is concerned, as he puts it, with the "truth" of the ghetto. But the ghetto's "truth" is more than a perceptive account of Negro and white attitudes or a documentation of social disintegration. The ghetto's "truth" includes a consideration of the possibilities of its positive transformation.

SHEILA RUSH

### A Critic of Literature and Politics

WRITERS AND POLITICS, by Conor Cruise O'Brien. New York: Pantheon. 259 pp. \$4.95.

Conor Cruise O'Brien, at least on the international scene the radical-liberal intellectual *par excellence*, has recently published a new collection of articles and speeches, *Writers and Politics*. As a United Nations official effectively in charge of the UN's Congo operation, and later as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana during a period of great unrest, he has been intimately involved in activities usually unfamiliar to Western intellectuals. What makes O'Brien's example all the more salutary is that he is not merely a diplomat, not merely a political scientist, nor a mandarin in the international movements for progressive education; he is also a literary man—a distinguished critic and literary historian.

O'Brien, who originally entered the

UN in the service of Ireland, is deeply concerned with Irish history and intellectual life. His book includes several long studies of Irish historical figures. In his introduction he examines the peculiar relationship between Ireland's orthodox institutions and the characteristic stance of her intellectual avant-garde. The following passage illustrates O'Brien's brilliant gift for analysis:

If we take an intellectual to be a person who prefers to try to do his thinking for himself . . . then we see that the intellectual, in a priest-led community, must develop strengthened means of defending himself. He acquires in the process special capabilities and special limitations. . . . He is likely to set great store by irony, the versatile, durable, and easily camouflaged weapon of every ideological guer-

rilla; he will take an almost morbid interest in hypocrisy . . . because of the natural targets it presents to irony, and perhaps above all because of its peculiar social function in subordinating the meaning of words to the practical needs of the moment. . . . It is both the weakness and the strength of the intellectual brought up in a Catholic tradition that he finds it peculiarly hard to accept such pragmatic intimations.

O'Brien's book includes important articles on James Baldwin, George Orwell, Dwight Macdonald and *The New Yorker*, and on varieties of the contemporary political experience. The two outstanding features of the book are O'Brien's exposure of the intellectual evasion practiced by Western critics and commentators—and his own passionate commitment to radical politics. Nor is O'Brien a dupe of the perennial party line. He is not an ideologue. He prefers to work for meaningful change rather than to permit an appreciation of nuances and complexities to paralyze his will. This is not to suggest that he has no reservations about the political situations in which he is involved. In Ghana, for example, political imprisonment became an accepted facet of government policy. As a man deeply committed to liberal values, including freedom of press and speech, O'Brien could not help being dismayed by what he saw. He appealed to President Nkrumah without success. As Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana, he then worked persistently behind the scenes to stem the government's unwarranted intrusion into the university's affairs. The book concludes with a moving address to the academic community, in which he defends the idea of academic freedom even while recogniz-

ing the central importance of the university in the social and political framework of Ghana.

The truth which O'Brien, as a critic of society and ideas, seeks to explore leads him neither to quietism nor resolute intransigence. He can tolerate and understand the needs of peoples in underdeveloped areas who must embrace drastic measures in order to project any future at all. On the other hand, he describes the face of the late Adlai Stevenson as ". . . the ingratiating moral mask which a toughly acquisitive society wears before the world it robs."

O'Brien's book demonstrates, then, that political advocacy is not tantamount to doctrinaire denial of complexities. The banality of liberalism, as the intellectual from Asia or Africa has long recognized, resides in its quietism with respect to putting its own house in order, and in the smugness with which liberal literati manage to separate the spiritual and moral from the immediately political. For too long, the liberal's compulsive addiction to fashionable nuance has resulted in the attenuation of those militant elements which make liberalism worthy of endorsement.

In a few pieces, O'Brien moves from topical criticism into literary history. He discusses R. W. B. Lewis' critical study *The Picaresque Saint*, which treats a distinguished group of modern novelists. He accuses Lewis of a crucial failure to discharge the duties implicit in his subject. O'Brien may somewhat overstate his case, but his point is in general well taken. He quotes Lewis' suggestion that "'the form or soul of the modern epoch . . . is the shape of individual experience during a period when political history

affects all experience.'” He charges that Lewis subsequently fails to examine sufficiently the writers' relation to the general political experience. O'Brien concludes that “the critic, like the turtle, is a specialist in fertile ambiguity: it is useful for survival.” This conclusion unfairly suggests a deliberate evasion or distortion on Lewis' part. The implication also blurs the important point, that the habitual, virtually unconscious orientation prevents anyone from thinking the unthinkable as efficiently as any overt restriction. That the Western critic resembles his Soviet counterpart more closely than he would like to suppose, “. . . by the way in which he acquiesces in the orthodoxy which prevails in his society,” is far from a gratuitous indictment. O'Brien adds that Western criticism, which systematically ignores unmistakable political implications in the material it treats, indicates “. . . a

dangerously close intellectual atmosphere.”

If this book reaches people in the literary community, it may stimulate a reexamination of political and literary orthodoxies. Of course, literature is not always, nor even predominantly, involved with politics, and the critic who spuriously indulges his appetite for political advocacy at the expense of literary relevance and taste will be doing no service to his profession. What O'Brien laments is the deterioration of public discourse in Western societies, largely due to the myopia which seems to afflict men of letters when they confront ugly political details. It might be naively optimistic to expect that this acknowledgement could provoke a widespread conversion to political activism, but it may help us to arrive at a new and challenging literary criticism.

ROBERT BOYERS

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*A REPORT ON THE L. I. D.* (continued from page 116)

Probably the single most dramatic breakthrough for the League was the opening in October of its Leadership Training Institute in Harlem. Hopefully, the Institute will become a permanent educational center in which young civil rights activists can receive training in the intellectual and organizational skills for leadership. Courses in Negro history, urban problems and community organizing techniques are now under way, drawing upon LID experts in a variety of fields. Robert Curvin, former head of Newark CORE and a member of CORE's NAC, is director of the project and has been working with civil rights organizations, block associations, and other community groups.

The Institute is a unique attempt to train the new kind of activist required in the current stage of the civil rights revolution.

The rich tradition of the League in past decades rested very largely on its muckraking pamphlets, which were disseminated by the hundreds of thousands. We have not, in a year, reclaimed those heights, but we have got our publications program moving again. My pamphlet *The Economics of Equality*, has sold out (15,000 copies) and has been excerpted for several anthologies. *To Build a New World: A Brief History of American Labor*, by Thomas R. Brooks, was distributed to over 17,000 high school students. It is expected to become a