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BY H. L. MENCKEN

The American As Literatus

THE OUTLOOK FOR LITERATURE, by A. H. Thorndike. \$1.50. 7½ x 5; 200 pp. New York: *The Macmillan Company*.
AMERICAN LITERATURE AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE NATIONAL MIND, by Russell Blankenship. \$4. 8½ x 5½; 731 pp. New York: *Henry Holt & Company*.

THE authors here are both professors in American colleges—Dr. Thorndike in the great rolling-mill of Columbia, and Dr. Blankenship in the modest filling-station of Whitman in far-away Walla Walla, Wash., a town which apparently owes its name to the students' yell. The remarkable thing about both books is that they are alike quite devoid of academic pedantry and timidity—that each shows a tolerance of ideas and a hospitality to æsthetic experimentation which, even a couple of decades back, would have been unimaginable in works emanating from pedagogues. When, in 1910, William Lyon Phelps issued from Yale a book arguing categorically that Mark Twain was a great artist, and perhaps almost as great as William Dean Howells, the sensation was profound—almost as profound, indeed, as if he had argued that women should be allowed to smoke. But since then a great deal of water has poured under the bridges, and now one finds Dr. Thorndike not only accepting old Mark as one of the revered elders of the national letters, but also speaking up very boldly for Dreiser, and Dr. Blankenship not only speaking up for Dreiser, but also allowing himself kind words for Ernest Hemingway and even Ben Hecht.

The change is pleasant indeed, and I only wish I could add that it is general. Unfortunately, there remain some laggards in the grove of Athene. Dr. Paul Elmer More continues resolutely to judge the emanations of poets and fabulists on strict Presbyterian principles, and Dr. Irving Babbitt continues to convert the Emersonian admonition to "trust to that prompting within you" into the axiom that *vertu* and virtue must, shall and always will be one and the same. What a poll of the pedagogues would show I don't know—perhaps a lingering majority for Drs. Phelps and Babbitt, at least in the colleges which still have compulsory chapel. But meanwhile, it is refreshing to behold the courageous iconoclasm of Drs. Thorndike and Blankenship. They have thrown off completely all the depressing inhibitions of their trade, and look at the unfolding scroll of American letters with fresh and eager eyes. What they see there is by no means a string of masterpieces, but they at least find a great deal of honest striving, and out of it, they believe, there will eventually issue something very solid and valuable.

Dr. Thorndike believes that poets and story-tellers are far more important men than they are commonly assumed to be. The fact that most people resort to them in search of nothing better than amusement is mistaken for evidence that amusement is all they purvey and convey. It should not be necessary, in order to show that this is not true, to point to such obvious examples as "Uncle Tom's Cabin"; there are more subtle indications of the truth at every hand. It was not the war which produced

that realistic reëxamination of the old moral standards which orthodox Americans now deplore so piteously; it was the attack of a multitude of literati, largely novelists. Were these literati themselves products of the war? Only in very small part. The more important and influential of them, *e.g.*, Dreiser, were in active practise long before a shot was fired, and even if much of the post-war rebellion had its impulse in the stresses of the conflict, then it took its terms from their books. A work such as "Jennie Gerhardt" is a dangerous document, and I certainly don't blame earnest Christians for denouncing it. Was "Jurgen" really obscene? Only to—those to whom it was obscene. But they were quite right in trying to put it down, for it was chock full of subversion from end to end—subversion not only of all the old Christian notions of private rectitude, but also of certain ancient and fundamental institutions—marriage, government, law, religion. It was, indeed, an immensely poisonous book, and its toxins still run in the veins of the American people. The professors all sneered at "Elmer Gantry"; even Dr. Blankenship is still in doubt about it. But I can easily imagine "Elmer Gantry" swinging a national election some day and overthrowing the American State Church—though by that time only literary historians may remember it.

In Dr. Blankenship's large volume probably no more than half of the space is given over to literature *per se*. The author's primary interest is not in writers, but in the conditions which throw them up. Thus his approach differs greatly from that of Dr. Thorndike. But the two arrive at substantially the same end. Dr. Blankenship believes that the course of American literature has been shaped mainly by four influences—that of European precept and example, that of the Calvinist theology, that

of the frontier, and that of mysticism. The last-named, I believe, has been greatly underrated by previous historians. Why Americans should be mystics I don't know, but there is the fact. Perhaps it is due to their general intellectual inferiority—to the fact that, in the overwhelming majority, they are peasants by heritage, and hence incapable of clear thought. Whatever the truth, they have shown a mystical tendency since the earliest days, and there is a strongly mystical element to this day, *not only in their religion, but also in their politics and their literature*. Dreiser, in his way, is quite as much a mystic as Emerson or Whitman, and Sherwood Anderson would find it much easier to talk to Meister Eckhart than to Locke, Gibbon or Darwin. Even Cabell has moments when he harks back to Elizabeth of Schönau, St. John of the Cross, and the Gottesfreunde. Lewis, of course, stands outside the stream. He is no more mystical than Voltaire, Huxley, or Josef Skoda. Perhaps that is why he continues to be subtly disreputable in his own country, despite the Nobel Prize. The normal Americano is impressed by his success, but instinctively distrusts his incapacity for seeing visions. That Rotarian spirit which is his chief butt is as purely mystical as Transcendentalism.

Dr. Blankenship has written a very interesting and useful book. His discussion of such things as the racial make-up of the American people, the influence of the national geography upon them, and the origin of their principal ideas is well-informed and often very shrewd. He writes far better than most professors, and has a great deal more to say. One may cavil at some of his concrete judgments, but there can be no doubt of his honesty and intelligence. It is a marvel that so enlightened a man should be left to teach in a cow college. He should exchange chairs with Dr. Babbitt.

Two Views of the English

THE ENGLISHMAN, by W. Macneile Dixon. 6s. 7¼ x 4¾; 224 pp. London: *Edward Arnold & Company.*

THE ENGLISH: ARE THEY HUMAN? by G. J. Renier. \$2.50. 7¾ x 5; 304 pp. New York: *Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith.*

DR. DIXON, if not an Englishman, is certainly a Briton, and one who very fairly represents his race; Dr. Renier is a Hollander with French and Italian blood in him, and as foreign in Britain as any white man could well be. Their books thus differ very greatly. Dr. Dixon writes as a professed patriot—he begins, in fact, with an eloquent defense of patriotism—; Dr. Renier, who spent many years in England as a university student and newspaper correspondent, writes as a highly intelligent foreigner—sympathetic but not deluded. The two books thus complement each other admirably, and deserve to be read together. Dr. Dixon is at his best in expounding the Englishman's peculiar notions of liberty, loyalty and duty; Dr. Renier shines in showing how the practical effects of those notions strike an impartial and philosophical observer.

The two authors differ diametrically in describing what they conceive to be the dominant English trait. Dr. Dixon believes that it is a strong feeling for the rights of the individual, and to it he ascribes all the familiar figures in the English pattern of behavior—the personal reserve, the general distrust of government (at least at home), the disdain of uniforms and dignities, the contempt for mere learning, the excessive and sometimes almost comic self-sufficiency. England, he says, houses more cranks and fanatics than any other country.

Every Englishman remains in some degree aloof from his society, keeping company with some pet idea of his own. He prefers

to see things for himself, to look through his own eyes, to act on his own initiative. He does not take kindly to the suggests of others, but works in his own garden on his private plan, planting what he wishes there. He declines to be standardized, to conform to a pattern, and asks of his would-be adviser or instructor, if not in words at least in actions, "Am I not, too, some one?"

Dr. Renier dissents sharply from all this. He grants freely that a sturdy self-reliance lies deep within the English character, and he believes that it is still strongly marked in the lower classes, both rustic and urban—among those Englishmen, as he puts it, who are uncertain about their *h's*. But in the classes that have mastered the aspirate he finds little sign of it. They are, in fact, rigidly standardized—perhaps the most rigidly standardized group of presumably educated people in the whole world. Every act of their lives, from the way they take in their food to the way they reproduce their kind, is surrounded by formidable rituals and taboos, and breaking any of them is a matter almost as serious as cutting a throat. Opinion may be free in England—but only within certain narrow limits. Eccentricity in conduct may go so far—but no further. There is quick recognition of talent, so long as it can spend itself within the conventional bounds, but nowhere else is the way so hard for a genuinely original man.

Dr. Renier believes that this caging of the upper-class Englishman, once so free and gay, was largely achieved by one man—the celebrated Dr. Arnold of Rugby. Arnold, though he has been dead less than a century, was the real founder of the public school tradition, which Englishmen are fond of thinking of as immemorial. He invented the doctrine that the one aim of a liberal education is to make the individual fit for command—in other words, fit to be