

A man in hew, all *Hews* in his controwling—

Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy *Will*,
And will to boot, and will in over-plus,

and so on. It is hardly likely that the printer printed that *Hews* so capitalized and italicized, by accident. All that must have meant something, and I am inclined to think that the reader of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." will be more than half persuaded to believe that it meant—Willie Hughes.

The Portrait of Mr. W. H. By Oscar Wilde.
Mitchell Kennerley.

AN AMERICAN EPITHETICIAN

By Burton Rascoe

IF I were disposed to credit the theory of reincarnation (and I am, at this moment, so disposed) I should say that Ben Hecht has inherited the soul which Joris-Karl Huysmans relinquished when he commended himself to the Trappists and to God. This notion gains a chimerical credence by a comparison of the physiognomy of the Chicago novelist with any portrait of the great French chronicler of the decadence.

I remember remarking when I first met Hecht a salient resemblance to the familiar Vallotton *masque* of Huysmans. Hecht has the same brachycephalic head, the same narrow, aquiline and spatulate nose, the same scant upper lip spanned by a ramiform mustache, the same arched eyebrows, the same serrated forehead, the same quaint look of whimsical malice. There is in both countenances an aspect at once satyric and spiritual, like that of a faun who has lived indoors. Only in their eyes do they differ: the eyes of Huysmans are fatigued and strained; the eyes of Hecht are alert and gay.

When Hecht talks the hallucination deepens. From his mocking lips comes that swift, deft poniarding of rivals and contemporaries we associate with Huysmans. One hears him say of Hugh Walpole, "an amiable mediocrity"; of Sir Oliver Lodge, "a befuddled old man capitalizing his dotage"; of Carl Sandburg, "an untrained prestidigitator surprised at the rabbits he pulls out of a plug hat". One recalls the crisp Huysmansian conversational dicta: of Lemonnier, "le déménageur"; of Bourget, "le rétameur"; of a woman novelist, "la cardeuse de matelas"; "les explosibles fariboles des romantiques"; "les pastilles mi-sel, mi-sucre de la littérature de Vichy". The epithetical cleverness of Huysmans is legendary. I may be pardoned the eccentricity of preferring that of the American. I seem to detect in Hecht a greater imagistic resourcefulness, a more sprightly caprice of adjectives and some justice.

Finally, to play with my notion before dismissing it, let me observe that there is in Hecht the Huysmansian contempt for the stupid and mediocre, the Huysmansian passion for setting off explosives under dead syntax and desuete word-groupings, the Frenchman's delight in the exotic, fantastic, and bizarre. There are these differences: Huysmans had the benefit of a richer cultural tradition and a more varied critical equipment; Hecht has a keener sense of form, a better documented disillusion, and a more corrosive cynicism. In Huysmans there is always a suggestion of faith; in Hecht there is no faith save in himself, and even in this there are elements and times of doubt. Hecht is a Huysmans who has seen the parade of petty human passions in the police court and these same petty human passions decked out as ideals in war. He is

amused by it and yet his amusement is a wry jocularity, tinged with a healthy regret that it is not otherwise that men should live. He sees life as an amusing spectacle simply for the reason that for so long he has failed to find it an edifying one.

It is for this reason that his superb novel "Erik Dorn", while it challenges consideration, will not generally be reviewed, I suspect, on its æsthetic merits. So patent is the personality behind the work that the man will eclipse, for some, the literary projection of himself. Thus we find Francis Hackett nodding in the course of a well-written review: "A style like Mr. Hecht's.... I find its novelty as tiresome as too many fuchsia growths. It is effective, but 409 pages is like a month of bismuth breakfasts.... It is, I believe, an actual straining for impressiveness, for accent, for effect." This last is a curious statement, for it records as an idiosyncratic belief subject to doubt, something which is patently obvious and implies that this something is reprehensible. Of course Hecht is straining for impressiveness, for accent, for effect, but what is wrong about that? Is not Mr. Hackett straining for effect when he speaks of *fuchsia growths* and *bismuth breakfasts*? All writing, considered as an art, is an actual straining for impressiveness, for accent, for effect. The means may be simplicity and directness, but it may also be involution, antithesis, paradox, any of the numerous media appropriate to the idea expressed. I shall later reveal that Hecht's style in this particular novel is splendidly in keeping with the theme of the book. Meanwhile it is well to point out that the novelty Mr. Hackett finds tiresome does not extend, as he says, throughout the 409 pages of the novel. There are pas-

sages of poise and tranquillity, of simplicity, ease, and directness. To characterize as an uninterrupted stridency, as does Mr. Hackett, a novel wherein passages dealing with war and revolution are depicted with words appropriate to the theme, is to deride the Brahms Third Symphony as a noisy and strident piece because of a remembered crescendo.

So, too, does Mr. Mencken, by an unwonted dereliction, describe as disorderly a book wherein disorder in brilliant passages is expressed in language that is inevitable if the impression is to be conveyed. Nor is it the critic's function to regret, as Mr. Hackett regrets with some animus, that Erik Dorn is an egoist, or to regret, as Mr. Macy regrets with tentative distaste, that Dorn is hard and brittle. For the unescapable fact is that Mr. Hecht set himself to the task of depicting an egoist, and not an altruist, a passionate young egoist, moreover, who has not lost his hardness and brittleness through wisdom and experience.

The novel is as carefully planned as an orchestral suite. Its opening is quiet and peaceful, an adagio of prose until the stormy Dorn is introduced. The development is into aspiration, adventure, disillusion, and defeat, with a recapitulation and coda softening into the tranquil mood with which the book began. It has the rhythmic variation of life itself, the cyclic progression from desire to satiety, from storm to quiet, with a thirst for beauty which remains insatiate. The irony is implicit in the suavely contrived recurrence to the identical setting of the original scene, with an indication that summer is gone and winter is come, wars and passion have died—"Outside the window the snow-covered buildings stood in the dark

like a skeleton world, like patterns in black and white."

"Erik Dorn" is conventional enough in theme, and in character motivation. It has its prototype in "Prometheus Bound" and in "Peer Gynt", in "Sannine", "The 'Genius'", "The Cords of Vanity", "The Man of Promise", "Martin Schüler", "Maurice Guest", and a host of others. It is the familiar theme of the artist type aspiring for something beyond the petty demands of a biological existence.

But Dorn is, in the jargon of the psychopathologists, a victim of *dementia præcox katatonica*; he is incapable of reacting with the normal human emotion to any common stimulus. He lives with a curious detachment from life, functioning brilliantly as a journalist in a purely mechanical way. He is an absolute skeptic, utterly without convictions of any sort, a complete sophist, interested in ideas as play-things, fascinated by words, and in love with phrases. Each new experience means to him only a readjustment of adjectives; life is a series of essays in literary composition; doctrines, creeds, and ideals are futile attempts to foist wall-mottos upon life, the essence of which is novelty and change.

It is to be questioned whether Hecht has sustained Dorn throughout as he has postulated him in the beginning. There is a dubious cast to the explanation of Dorn's deception as arising from his disinclination to cause his wife sorrow; for had he been as emotionally unresponsive as he is elsewhere depicted, it is difficult to believe that consideration for Anna would have balked his will. It is a duality in Hecht's own makeup which is responsible for this failure to realize Dorn perfectly. It is the same duality which makes his account of the

German revolution a brilliant but contradictory and meaningless thing. He is divided between an intellectual contempt for the shibboleths and activities of the revolutionists and an instinctive sympathy with the plight of the proletarian.

Few novelists now writing have the eyes to see the strings behind life's marionettes that Hecht has, and few have his ability to picture those strings in a paragraph. Anna and Von Stinnes, Lockwood (in a few pages) and Hazlitt are realized with dexterous strokes. The portrait of Hazlitt may very well hang in that same gallery wherein Homais is the masterpiece. And again one will not easily forget the courtroom scene and its aftermath, the newspaper office, the pages devoted to the outbreak of the war, the running commentaries on the catastrophe and peace. For Hecht among all the young men of the post-war generation of American novelists has, it seems to me, the most opulent equipment in the matter of intelligence, experience, and imaginative power. The verbal patterns, the pun-gently evocative word-combinations, the strange richness of metaphor in "Erik Dorn" cause it, if for no other reason, to stand out as a distinct new model in the mechanics of expression. Hecht is our first great epithetician.

Erik Dorn. By Ben Hecht. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

THE PLYMOUTH PAGEANT

By Norreys Jephson O'Conor

THE writer of a pageant is confronted by the most difficult problem of dramatic technique: he must tell a story, usually covering a period of years, through a form wherein the pictorial element is uppermost, yet if