

PATTERNS FOR THE FREE

By Irwin Edman

"A poet", says Thomas Love Peacock, "is a semi-civilized barbarian in a civilized age. The march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backwards." But even men of letters, so often the facile *ignoranti* of their generation, cannot remain long or altogether insensitive to the transformations in thought and in daily life which are making the contours of a new age. Poets breathe the common air; they cannot escape the poison of new ideas, though they may never have heard the name of the most deadly current bacillus. It was to be expected that the work of Darwin and Lyell should eventually find related imaginative utterance in a Hardy or an Anatole France. The laboratory finds its public voices among writers who have never seen a test tube. The new psychology affects novelists who could not identify an intelligence quotient or measure a reaction time.

In the same way it is inevitable that the rumble of industry should have reached even the Ivory Tower. The tumult of cities and the nervous anarchy of a jazz age must necessarily find appropriate voices and adequate patterns. Poets may yearn to move among eternities but the stream of their consciousness is colored with all the deposits of that life which most of them daily live in a mechanized, standardized and urbanized civilization.

The revolts against tradition in literature have too often been explained away as the mere exhibitionism of literary eccentrics or of writers perversely

weary of beautiful classic moulds. The desire for change is far more plausibly explained by the rise of mechanical science, the spread of industry and the sophistication of psychology than by any merely personal foible of an abstract litterateur.

The revolt against traditional patterns in literature has been parallel with the revolt against traditional patterns in thought and life. In comparison with the revolution of our ideas concerning God and sex (the most cosmic and the most personal of human experiences), a modification of merely literary conventions may seem altogether trivial. What is a change in a cadence compared with a change in a creed? Mechanical inventions have changed the range and the intimate detail of the lives of most denizens of the planet. A verbal device of a novelist may hope at most to touch the imaginations of thousands; a chemist deals with poison gases that may kill or synthetic foods that may nourish millions. Why, one may well ask, should changes in the patterns of literature merit the attention of those interested in the larger and more serious patterns of our lives. Why should rhetoric become more important than existence?

If changes in literary forms were simply verbal and rhetorical, they would indeed be unimportant. But the revolts in the last fifty years have been expressions of those deeper and more pervasive changes which literature is gradually learning to express. There has been, in the first place, a reaction

against the genteel tradition in literature. Writers have wearied of the routine prettiness of a "literary" poetry. They have sickened of the stereotype beauties of a tepid, abstract and elegant world. Time and again in the history of literature the same phenomena have occurred. Writers who have wished to be something more than flutists in words have wanted to give expression to all the possible areas of human thought and emotion. It is precisely this concern with those larger tracts of experience that makes Shakespeare seem to most readers so immeasurably more massive than Racine's tutored rhetoric of his so beautiful, so restricted and so rhetorical a world. Now the moderns, too, wish the scope of literature to be enlarged to permit the expression of that variety of thought and that anarchy of emotion which is coming to seem so peculiarly characteristic of our age. Poets have occasionally sought new forms and devices for their own sakes, and have found in a freshness of rhythm or a strange new trick of dialogue the sheer delight of an original technical beauty. In an imperfect universe any good is a cause for gratitude; and the searchers after novel loveliness ought to be thanked rather than forgiven. But, for the most part, the novelists and poets of the last twenty-five years have been feeling for and working toward new forms for more responsible reasons. They have found the old forms inadequate to express those miscellanies of life hitherto inadmissible to the literature of the genteel tradition.

The pursuit of new forms is thus engendered as part of the interest in a newer subject matter, and a larger one. Contemporary fiction, among its more serious practitioners, is no longer content with that prescribed and garden-

terrain, cultivated so exquisitely and tactfully by an Edith Wharton and with such gravity by a Henry James. Their choice and smooth human landscapes now have come to seem meaningless elegant house parties on large enclosed estates shut in by tall trim hedges from the vulgar general life. The novelists, led by Bennett in England, by Lewis in America, have been reaching out among the rich areas of dulness and poverty, of humdrum tragedy and the dull edged comedy of the common man. They have passed from lawns in Surrey or terraces in Newport to the mean streets and mean souls of middle class life.

In the place of a poetry "warbling", as Norman Douglas somewhere says "about buttercups", we have a Masters in America, or a Masfield or a Wilfrid Gibson in England to try to make a music out of the glare and heat and routine of our own omnipresent industrial civilization. The polite blue surfaces of social romance have been ruffled by the uprush of dark passions not hitherto recognized as decent or tolerable materials for fiction. The actual unspoken torments of sex no longer lie veiled in the urbanities of a Howells or a Henry James. The net spiritual result of the recent serious movements in fiction may be suggested by saying that fiction has been bringing into its province whole areas of human concern that the older generation would have regarded as inelegant or unliterary. Writers as different as James Joyce and Sherwood Anderson have been attempting to bring literature, as Socrates brought philosophy, from the clouds to the haunts of men.

Underlying the appearance of new forms lies thus an interest in wider materials. Literature is no longer to be regarded as the expression of a choice and pretty, but of an authentic

and comprehensive cosmos. Dreiser brings the actualities of sex; Lewis brings the actualities of business; Anderson, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf bring the misty and turbid recesses of the spirit into the field of literary subject matter. A wider area of the social scene is uncovered, and the novelist cuts deeper into the psychological soil. The outer aspect and the inner ferment have both been more completely and more minutely studied. It has come to seem a little tepid to be interested in writing merely as a subtle working in curious and irrelevant jewels. The adult artist is beginning to recognize that to write, if one is not merely to hum, is to write about something, and that writing is ultimately rendered great by the weight and poignancy of what it says and represents. Sinclair Lewis is impressive perhaps chiefly because he renders so bitterly and unmistakably the portrait of a futile civilization; Sherwood Anderson, because he follows so sincerely the inner stream of lost and reaching souls.

The interest in the enlargement of subject matter, if it has led to the search for new forms, has been partially eclipsed in interest by these forms. There are many reasons why an artist may come to be fascinated by new forms for their own sake. One of them arises from his awareness of a wider content than the older forms have embodied. The artist may feel that the formal rhythms and the stereotyped vocabulary of the older poetry, the objective and materialistic photography of fiction are inadequate to represent those wide tracts of experience and those fine *nuances* of feeling which are the business of a responsible modern intelligence. Or the interest in new forms may be the characteristic delight of the virtuoso in experiment, the abstracted

pleasure of the technician in an unprecedented handling of words.

The arguments for experiments in verse forms are by this time familiar, and the experiments by this time dull. We have ceased to hear of late of the slavery of rhyme and the strait jacket of the formal metres. We have tired a little of puny imitators of Whitman's roaring freedom. But the tinkling and the controversy have left a net deposit that is all to the health of English verse. The disciples of free verse wished to remove poetry from the character of a formal ballet at a court function. They wished it to be the spontaneous song of a democratic and miscellaneous world. They have been more spontaneous than singing, and they have often widened the area of poetic materials without making that material into music. But their intention was generous and their effect salutary. Now that the heat of rebellion has died down, we know that the revolt against standard forms has been a little silly. Milton uses a thousand forms of blank verse in a thousand lines, and in the hands of a master, even the jeered heroic couplet may become a singing of endless variety; rhyme may become a subtle and pliable instrument of iteration and psychological echo.

The net effect of the revolt in poetry has been to release poets from the conventions of the poetasters and render them free voices of whatever of passion and intelligence they are provoked to in their life in the contemporary world. It may be a generation yet before the atmosphere of the modern mind becomes sufficiently pervasive to touch even poets. It was several hundred years after naturalism started in Greece that Lucretius appeared in Rome to translate the science of a free spirit into music. But intelligence is becoming domestic in modern verse. Miss Mil-

lay treats love and E. A. Robinson treats failure and success with an unremitting ironic intelligence that is the very tincture of its time, and they sing in forms too beautiful to date. Other poets are learning from them that the free mind is not doomed to flee even beauty. All forms, the sonnet included, are free, so only that they are subdued to the articulate intention of an authentic emotion and an honest mind. An artist will find forms to fit his moods, and his moods may eventually be magnificent enough to match the wide canvas of possible human settings, and the subtilized organ of possible human passions. Only those enslaved to rebellion will say that free verse is the sole adequate instrument for a free poet. It is striking that Edwin Arlington Robinson, in many ways the most emancipated in temper and the most magnificent in reach of contemporary poets, has found in the ancient and austere pattern of the sonnet a suitable instrument for the singing of imaginative depths and freedom.

In the case of fiction there have been reasons far more serious than those of the virtuoso why new forms have been sought and found. James Joyce, more intelligibly and availably, Virginia Woolf, and, to some degree, May Sinclair have contrived to throw into suspicion the objective realism of Galsworthy, Bennett and Wells. Their method in fiction is indirectly — in the case of May Sinclair, fairly directly — the fruit of the new psychology and of the more recent philosophies.

From the new psychology these writers and many others have learnt the cardinal fact, known though not formulated by the common man, that people's behavior is as much determined by the things they do not think about as by the things about which they consciously do think. From phi-

losophies new and old they have learnt that what is "really real" is what happens in, or to, a man's consciousness; that the objective world dissolves in fact and in analysis to what it is as experienced in the living stream that is a person's thought or emotion. D. H. Lawrence has tried and succeeded, despite all his turbid falterings, in making clear or at least phosphorescent what happens in the dark forest of the troubled subconscious self. James Joyce and Virginia Woolf have tried to reveal what the world is through and in the minds of those to whom it appears in broken flashes and intermingling echoes. The older method that revealed character in action and action in terms of doors and windows, tables and chairs, the meat, potatoes and furniture of our daily lives has come to seem unconvincing. It has, moreover, come to seem irrelevant to those novelists and those readers interested in the most primary of all realities, a man's soul. The new psychological method in fiction (a method, by the way, as old as Chekhov and Dostoevsky) is not a mere playful variation in form. It amounts to little short of a revolution in the fictionist's approach to life and his conception of the content of narrative literature.

The way in which, as the psychologists say, we apperceive our world is largely a matter of habit. And we are certainly habituated to the older method in fiction. Even the receptive find James Joyce as difficult as he is impressive. Our minds, as Bergson long ago suggested, are geometrized. We see life in fixities, in the routine categories of mechanism and of logic.

The sane man, it has been said, holds a lunatic in leash. And that poignant madness that lies simmering in the interior of many lives, outwardly sensible and polite, is only now being uttered in

its native idiom by writers like May Sinclair, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. That idiom of the basic hum and simmer of our lives, those glimpses of terrifying and real abysses, of haunting and ugly echoes, of thunderclaps of beauty arising suddenly in the midst of obscene reveries: these are surprising and terrible things. They fit into no usual codes and into no hitherto outspoken grammars of emotion. We are inclined to find them unintelligible or horrible or absurd. It will require many years of training to understand these new fluent languages by which novelists are trying to introduce us to the sobbing and staccato current of ourselves.

Dr. Johnson long ago pounded his

walking stick testily on the pavement and thought that thus he had refuted Berkeley's conviction that the world was merely our ideas and perceptions. Many critics of these newer novelists bang, too, on the pavement or on their own heads and insist that these hard things alone are realities, and that only the stiff objective language and method of the older fiction is intelligible. The newer novelists are trying to find patterns that will free us to look keenly at ourselves. These patterns in fiction are not yet found. But these writers are pointing the way toward an art that will be as lucid and succinct and intelligible as the old, and will speak more eloquently and fully to man of his own unpetrified soul.

SONGS FOR A GENEROUS MAN

By Marion Strobel

I

YOU gave me green balloons — O foolish things! —
 A sun-flower as giddy as the sun.
 My hands that were so full of offerings
 Were not too full to hold another one.

The foolish gifts to make me laugh or cry!
 The sprig of lilacs and the parasol!
 I knew how light your love was, how could I
 So used to holding things, have let it fall?

II

Even the streets where we have been
 Will not make me sigh or tarry,
 Even a corner will only mean
 An apothecary.

I shall call a moon a moon,
 All your beauty I'll forget,
 You'll be nothing to me soon —
 But not yet . . . But not yet . . .