

# WILLIAM ELLERY LEONARD AND SOME OTHERS

By Burton Rascoe

## A HEART LAID BARE

THE LOCOMOTIVE GOD. *By William Ellery Leonard. The Century Co. \$4.*

IN reviewing this book, I feel almost as a priest might feel if he were called upon to recite in public the gist of a peculiarly anguished confession toward which he had been sympathetic, greatly in awe, and utterly without the resources necessary for either comfort or advice. Perhaps I can express my feelings better if you will imagine me for a moment as such a priest — a well-meaning, vastly inexperienced and unresourceful priest of a country parish who had been called upon to give ear to the confession of Prometheus. There are no rules in the handbook to guide me in this emergency; there is no formula of words provided for my comment. The honor is too great for me to bear with equanimity — even though it is an honor shared by all who read this book — and to speak of it seems treason to my sense of fitness if not precisely a violation of a sacred trust.

At this point, indeed, I wish I had Mr. Hergesheimer's firm serenity and jaunty nonchalance. It would be a relief to be able to say, as Hergesheimer said, to the tortured Prometheus, "Leonard, don't be so noble." It would help some to be able to become flip and facetious, to be able to say something that would get a laugh, a Heinesque laugh, even, — with a sardonic twist; but if I grinned it would be a rictus and I would loathe the appearance of humor in it.

For this book is a confession that is made as a release, a necessary release, lest an imminent madness conquer the confessor. It is intimate, searching, febrile, terrifying — and arrogant. Professor Leonard has no humility, feigned or natural, no capacity for self-abasement. He has none of the wheedle and whine of one who craves for the absolution of pity. His testament is

proud, defiant, and magnificent. Right in the very midst of telling of his insane wife's suicide, he interrupts himself as though he heard at a certain point a remark from the reader, and he squelches that hypothetical reader before going on with the story.

In autobiography, to find the equal of "The Locomotive God", you must go not to the classical confessions-in-print, but to those passages in the work of the great poets into which they have put their most intense feeling about the mystery and terror of tragic lives — or to Dostoyevsky. It is a torrential confession. One should be phlegmatic in order to read to the end without being affected by it. Yet the "normal" man will find little in it to produce the satisfying emotion of recognition.

Among the faults of the book is that it contains too much, and, yet in one essential, nothing. Morbidly introspective, Professor Leonard has struggled desperately to discover what is wrong with him, what is the cause of his phobias and neuroses. He has no faith in the Freudian theory of the sexual cause of psychic disturbances and he traces his fear back to a recurrent image that aroused fear in his childhood. Standing on a railway platform with his mother when he was a little child, he saw a gigantic locomotive engine bearing down upon him. It aroused his fright and wonder. The engine seemed, or came to seem, the material symbol of an all-powerful and relentless fate. It became his idea of God — the fearful God of the Old Testament in the guise of a soul-less machine.

Professor Leonard has intellectualized this emotion he associates with the Locomotive God. A man who has never been able to reconcile himself to his surroundings and who has always been at odds with society, he thinks of the Locomotive as the god of the Industrial Age — a god inimical to the poet and the professor of the humane sciences.

I think (perhaps unwarrantably) that while endeavoring to lay bare his heart, Professor Leonard is unconsciously reticent about the most important physical fact in his life. I cannot pretend to diagnose his neurosis; for I am neither a Freudian adept nor a specialist in psychiatry; but one of his difficulties, it seems to me, is as familiar as the case-histories that are commonplaces in old wives' tales.

For Professor Leonard's sake, of course, I should like to see him relieved of his neurosis and to see him become a happy, normal, dull and commonplace mortal. But I believe there is no cure for such as he. He is what he is, a great spirit and a fine poet, whose tormenting disabilities enable the more sluggish and apathetic among us to experience vicariously through his writings intensities of experience which we otherwise would not have.

Professor Leonard believes that he has hit upon the best method of recovering memories of childhood. That method is to achieve a state of serenity by freeing the mind of all current worries and problems and to think back upon some particular event. That event once recalled stirs up a train of associations and there are thus brought to the consciousness remembrances of things past which had never been present in the mind since they happened. The difficulty, he says, lies in the natural tendency to recall these events not in their pure state — just as they occurred — but in an ideal or romanticized state.

Professor Leonard makes a common mistake here which Dr. Watson and the Behaviorists (with all their errors) set us right upon: we do not really recall these events, that is we do not re-live them: we merely think about them, and in thinking about them we use the machinery of thinking which consists mostly of words. Therefore whatever we are able to recall of our childhood — at least for others to hear — is conditioned not only upon our vocabulary, but also upon the factors that influence the use of that vocabulary at a particular time.

What I have just said is possibly confusing; but there is less in it than meets the eye. For example: you may wake up one morning

after a good night's sleep, with your digestion in good condition and your financial and domestic affairs in happy shape. Suddenly you may recall some event in your childhood. Your natural tendency in such a mood would be to describe that event not as a tragic but as a comic predicament. You are in a fairly well adjusted state; it would be difficult to imagine yourself any happier or more contented than you are at the moment; therefore you cannot feel past events as tragic, even though they were, at the time, tragic; and the words you use in describing those events inevitably tend to present the event in a humorous light.

But supposing things have gone wrong with you for some time. Your health is not all it should be; you have financial worries, and you are not pepped up by an active love interest that is evenly matched. In such circumstances you can recall the past only with nostalgia; what you have experienced and what you have had, in the past, is inevitably (to your mind) much finer, more enjoyable, lovelier and more ideal than anything you can possibly experience at the present time or in the future. Therefore, in recalling a past event in such a mood, you use words to describe it which are compact with tenderness. And the aspect in which that event is presented is romantic.

There is probably no way of using the vocabulary to present a situation in life precisely as it happened. Realism, then, is an illusion. What we mean by "realism" is the presentation of a situation in words which common experience recognizes as being uninfluenced by the prevailing clichés of sentiment. Those clichés are arrived at by the compulsion of mass wish-fulfillment: we all want to be happy, and the secret of happiness is the avoidance of certain things which really cannot always be avoided and by the cultivation of virtues which biological necessity rejects.

Professor Leonard, then, is not realistic, even in this remarkable endeavor to tell us all about himself. What he writes is written with the highest and at the same time the most selfish of motives. He doesn't care about you or me, or about what you and I think; what he cares about is solving his

own problem. And in attempting to solve it, he has made clear to his readers a great many things, I think, which are not clear to himself.

One of those things, I suspect, is the importance of money in his life. We are taught to regard money as something base and material and never to relate our spiritual difficulties to the difficulties of our pocket-book; yet for many of us, at one time or another, the condition of our pocketbook is the most insistent and the most important problem in our life. We don't want it to be so; but it is there, clamantly, plangently. To avoid it we would have to be clods, incapable of exterior irritations and deaf to the demands of our creditors.

That, if I may say so, not in criticism but as a matter of record, is one of the factors which has made Professor Leonard's adjustment to life peculiarly difficult. There is in him no compromise or tendency toward evasion. It is magnificent but it butters no parsnips. He has borne, in his time, tremendous responsibilities; he has had to support, out of meagre means, relatives who have found themselves incapable of paying their way in life; he has had sickness to finance; and he has had himself thrown out of jobs with amazing frequency on account of his temperament and his views. "A brilliant man", so runs the sinister and damaging recommendation, "but dangerous". And so, money, or the security of an income, has become a major factor in, at least, his unconscious thinking.

It is extraordinary that he has remained throughout his tragic experiences so kindly, so detached, so impersonal, and so acute. He recalls his first impression of George Sylvester Viereck: "On my first interview he had followed his mother down the corridor and, agitated that the stranger had not noticed him, popped out from behind her skirts with the anxious cry; 'Ich bin ein Dichter; ich bin ein Dichter'. He was. A German lyricist even then. . . . He founded the Poetry Society. Then the Literary Vigilantes decreed him dead as a bad poet because of politics. They still keep him out of the Anthologies. And Haldemann-Julius reprints him in his Little

Blue Books with reprints of Swinburne and Wilde and Villon and other pariahs." Professor Leonard is kind and sympathetic to another tortured man, whose temperament is as much to blame for his difficulties as are the external features in life against which he has run afoul — Ludwig Lewisohn. He saw the young and exuberant John Erskine rising at Columbia to heights which now mean rock-bound solvency through the popular reception of his "Private Life of Helen of Troy" and his "Galahad". He was visited by the electric Sinclair Lewis; and in this autobiography there are many memorable impressions of celebrities who have made their way to that restricted area of a few square miles out of which Professor Leonard dares not venture on account of his terrific fears.

Of "The Locomotive God", I can write no more. It is a book that may torture you, or give you a terrifying glimpse of inner experience, or leave you cold and unmoved. But I submit that it is a tremendous book, one of the great autobiographies in our literature.

## THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AL SMITH

ALFRED E. SMITH: A CRITICAL STUDY. By Henry F. Pringle. Macy-Masius, \$3.

IF Al Smith goes into the White House, his official biographer has taken care that there will be few misapprehensions about him — those misapprehensions that might arise among his well-wishers should he fall, as Cabell said statesmen have a habit of doing, a shade short of omniscience. Mr. Pringle has been at pains to show the worst as well as the best about his subject and seems almost to fear that his book might be taken for the usual applesauce of campaign biographies — which it certainly is not.

He reveals the Governor as a just and likable person, honest, intelligent, a good mixer, well-dressed and without a trace of scandal in his private life. He describes him also as an almost illiterate man, who reads no books and doesn't even care enough about