

FITZ-GREENE HALLECK: AN EARLY KNICKERBOCKER WIT AND POET by Nelson Frederick Adkins (YALE. \$5.00)

THE Knickerbockers! What diverting suggestions the very name conjures up! Irving, Paulding, Halleck, Drake, and finally Bryant and Cooper, who brought the group together in the famous Bread and Cheese Club! "We are laughing philosophers," wrote the authors of *Salmagundi*, defining the Knickerbocker spirit, "and clearly of opinion, that wisdom, true wisdom, is a plump, jolly dame, who sits in her arm chair, laughs right merrily at the farce of life and takes the world as it goes." The voice of a settled and prosperous commercial community, of a journalistic town-spirit, responsive to the current reaction from the super-heroic and sentimental, the Knickerbockers owe much of their charm to their incongruous mixing of sentiment and humor. Especially is this true of Halleck, whose forte Bryant defined as "ludicrous contrasts, produced by bringing the nobleness of the ideal world into comparison with the homeliness of the actual". Thus the "Croaker Papers", on which Drake collaborated, ring the changes on the theme that "existence is a merry treat" while using satirical laughter as a means of rendering eccentric foibles ridiculous.

Lowell called Halleck a "pseudo-Don Juan", and doubtless Byron, whose work he edited, encouraged Halleck, of both Puritan and Cavalier derivation, to mix imaginative seriousness and burlesque. While "Marco Bozzaris" is suggestive of Byron in its devotion to Greek freedom, Halleck's "Fanny" is in the manner of "Beppo". For "Fanny" satirizes the social aspirations of a newly-rich merchant and his daughter, endeavoring "to carry the reader far away on a wave of sentiment and to leave him suddenly startled and disillusioned on the sandy shore of common sense". "Alnwick Castle" reminds one of Scott in its picture of the pomp and splendor of the high-born Percy's feudal home, but at

the end this picture ironically fades into that of a modern "market town". And "Young America", Halleck's last ambitious poem, satirizes the sentimental notions of American idealism by personifying the nation as a boy who is too idealistic to become a Preacher, Soldier, or Teacher—a boy who ends by marrying "A Rich Wife".

Indeed, this pervasive warring between the ideal and the real seems to be the common denominator of most of Halleck's activities. At a time when democracy was considered divine, he spoke of himself as "an open, frank, outspoken and avowed monarchist, devoted to the godly government of the one, and detesting the ungodly government of the many". At a time when America throbbed with perfectibilian and humanitarian faith, Halleck's *Epistle to Robert Hogbin, Esq., Chairman of the Committee of Working-Men* ridicules the "impulse divine" dictating revolt against "laws, churches, and marriages" as well as visions of a Utopia where "no infants are born under six feet in height". After the onslaughts of deism and transcendentalism on ecclesiasticism, the elderly wit repeatedly expressed the deepest respect for the Catholic Church—in the words of a friend—as "a Spiritual Power organized and established on fixed canons for the conversion, the solace, discipline, guidance, and repose of erring, afflicted, wayward, and weary humanity".

Such is the subject of Nelson Frederick Adkins's biography, a beautifully bound volume printed by the Yale University Press and based upon a Yale doctoral dissertation. After reading those modernistic biographies in which guesswork masquerades as creative portraiture, it is a rare delight to encounter a book distinguished for monumental industry, for scholarly honesty and precision, and for comprehensiveness and judicial insight. New and authentic evidence appears in the form of some fifty-odd letters printed for the first time. Mr. Adkins has exhaustively ransacked every contemporary newspaper and

magazine for the authentic colors which have enabled him to paint a three-dimensional portrait of Halleck, his spirited contemporaries, their reading public, and their interrelations. In one sense the book is thus an amazingly detailed and convincing study of the literary and social conditions of the age. Halleck's literary sources are traced through a host of writers, and Mr. Adkins follows every step of Halleck's long career from the counter of a Connecticut store, through the weary days in New York counting-houses and hilarious evenings at some simple inn, through the European trip which gave him sight of Coleridge and Scott, through his great fame, to his last walks on the Guilford streets with his green cotton umbrella. But Mr. Adkins endeavors not only to explain and describe his hero; he writes an excellent chapter, "The Man of Letters", "to consider critically his literary work", to "discover his strength and weakness as an artist". Tribute is paid to Halleck's felicity of expression, his simplicity and

terseness, his melody and lyricism, his gallantry, and especially his mixing of irony and sentiment. Yet Mr. Adkins thinks that these contrasts became "tragic; they are seen as the inevitable struggles of a mind seeking rest and finding none". Halleck was unable to reconcile "the ideal world typified by a devotion to the past, and the world of daily experience whose presence he found inevitable". Intellectually shallow and uncultured, he was without poetic subtlety; he was indifferent to the darker problems of conduct. As he himself said, he was "but an amateur in the literary orchestra, playing only upon a pocket flute". The youth enamoured of the "delights of another world" of romance, who told Drake "it would be heaven to lounge upon the rainbow and read Tom Campbell", grew up in a "bank-note world" as the business secretary of Jacob Barker and Astor. His work, minor as it is, is important because it represents a literary record of a focal chapter in the intellectual history of America.

HARRY HAYDEN CLARK

ESSAYS AND CRITICISM

FROM TOULOUSE-LAUTREC TO
RODIN by *Arthur Symons* (KING. \$4.00)

IN THESE thirteen essays on certain Impressionists and their contemporaries, we are given every opportunity to estimate Mr. Symons's position as a critic. In the first essay, for instance, we have something about Toulouse-Lautrec's life, something about his painting, and something about contemporary Paris life (which last Mr. Symons can describe more brilliantly than anyone else alive today). There would be nothing wrong with such a threefold treatment if the parts were not inextricably confused, if the confusion were not between esthetics and ethics, between art and life, and if it did not result in essentially "literary" interpretations such as this: "*Le Sommeil* is superb; it shows a half-naked woman in a state of stupor. She might, for all I know, dream of this sentence of Beaudelaire, et cetera, et cetera". Such a "literary" interpretation interposes itself between Mr. Symons and his object, so that we learn quite a lot about Mr. Symons and nothing very much about *Le Sommeil* or Toulouse-Lautrec. And we can find the reason for this confusion in one phrase: "Perversity! the most sublime and the most sinister word that exists . . ."; for this word, that has to Mr. Symons almost every shade of meaning but no precise definition, imposes its hierarchy of loose meanings upon the whole essay with the most disorderly results. But if we continue in this book a little longer, we shall find a sobriety in the essays on Degas and Moreau, an immediacy in the portrait of Beardsley, and certain sound and independent judgments in the essay on Rodin, which are simply due to the fact that Mr. Symons

is not, at the moment, the victim of his own pleasurable and acquired obsession about Evil.

We cannot take Mr. Symons as a writer on esthetics very seriously, because Mr. Symons likes to take his esthetic to the Moulin Rouge and the *hotels des sports* and mingle it with cocottes and absinthe and perfumes and sin—in a word with "perversity"; but we can take him seriously as a writer. When his interpretation is most "literary", then his prose is stylized—it preserves all the cadences, all the mannerisms, all the vocabulary of false beliefs, of a period when style was literally pursued to death; but in those moments when his enthusiasm is infectious, his judgments sound and generous, and his wide experience and reading properly applied, when, in fact, he ceases to identify himself with a generation long dead and long without the power to influence us—then he achieves a personal style, then he is himself. It is these moments that we have to consider, for they account for Mr. Symons's survival, and they prove that this survival is due to something more than mere inability to change.

GEORGE DANGERFIELD

THE WHEEL OF FIRE: ESSAYS IN INTERPRETATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S SOMBRE TRAGEDIES by *G. Wilson Knight* (OXFORD. \$5.00)

MR. KNIGHT's attempt to create a new form of Shakespeare interpretation which, while considering all of the tragedies rather than single works, emphasizes the "temporal" and "spatial" elements and the poetic symbolism, proves vastly more successful than T. S. Eliot's ill-advised introduction would suggest.