

# REVIEW AND COMMENT

## Class Honors

WITH every year's naming of the current Pulitzer prize winners the need of a real academy, French style, an official representative of official bourgeois culture, becomes more apparent. As the recent NEW MASSES article "A French Course in Fascism" indicated, the reactionary bourgeoisie in France is entrenched in the Academy from which comes such intellectual support for fascism as exists. Everybody in France knows exactly whom and what the Academy represents, and what to expect in the books it "crowns."

The Pulitzer committee, made up of big shot paper publishers and the academic big shots selected by them for the sub-committees, lacks the necessary tradition and authority and therefore its position is ambiguous. It knows very well that the bigwigs and stuffed shirts of America expect it to produce respectable mediocrities; but it faces the nagging dissent of independent critics who, every year, have to explain afresh to the American public that the committee is bound to select mediocrities. Also, every year the radical press shows that the selections are made in a definite class interest. Anticipation of this dissent and criticism makes the Pulitzer committees uncertain and inconsistent, with the result that, now and again, as in the case of this year's drama selection, "Idiot's Delight," it makes a liberal gesture.

The committees have been having difficulties recently. There is a scarcity of talent among the reactionaries. In the cultural world the deserts are on the right, the fertile regions on the left. This has forced the committees into a close gleaning of the middle ground.

In the case of their prize novel *Honey in the Horn*, the author H. L. Davis possesses rich talents. He may even by a later and truer artistic use of his talent disqualify himself for further Pulitzer honors. His book is unusual for its unsentimental portrayal of a group—but a carefully selected group—of Oregon pioneers. Davis found it necessary to print a foreword disavowing any intent toward "social criticism" or "social reform." The disavowal is important as a confession that Mr. Davis was aware of social forces which he ignored in the book. THE NEW MASSES reviewer, James Hennessey, concluded his comments with:

As you read of Clay Calvert moving so wildly over the turbulent land, retreating more and more deeply into the wilderness, you get an impression that he is not hiding from the police, but that the author is dodging an understanding of the class struggles of whose existence he is aware, avoiding the responsibility of making those "social criticisms" that automatically exempt one from

winning a Harper Prize or the praise of H. L. Mencken.

The Pulitzer's committee's "best" biography was selected in its own tradition of size. Ralph Barton Perry's *The Thought and Character of William James* runs to 1,600 closely printed pages. It is a solemn eulogy. Its chief aim seems to be to reconcile James the empiricist and James the mystic, James being one of the most conspicuous split personalities in the realm of philosophy, and thereby to gain him on the side of the godly. H. W. Fairchild wrote in his NEW MASSES review:

The truth of the matter is that James' religious, fideistic, voluntaristic leanings resulted from devoted study of his father's teaching. The elder James had been a theologian of the old school, insisting on the tragic essence of Christian hope and on death as a way of life. On the other hand, William James' empiricism was acquired in his constant attachment to the biological sciences and in his reading of Locke, Hume, Berkeley and Mill. These diverse streams—the religious and the scientific—never harmonized in him, though he wrestled with them all his life. The waste is the more pitiful since the two positions James struggled to reconcile are essentially contradictory. The nature of science is fundamentally at variance with unverifiable "certainties" about the supernatural. Any attempt to blend them produces a square circle instead of a rounded system. The philosophy of James remains the philosophy of a split personality.

In poetry the Pulitzer committee sank to its lowest depth. Robert P. Tristram Coffin's literary achievements, though they resulted in prolific production—he is the author of some twelve published volumes—had won him so little prestige that he makes no appearance in the not-over-discriminating literary who's who, *Authors Past and Present*; nor is his prize book on the shelves of the New York Public Library, proud of its more than a million volumes. But Mr. Coffin is a former Rhodes scholar, teaches at a university, is

religious, has shown in his essays an infallible taste for the trivial, and has not stirred beyond seventeenth century England in his literary and historical interests. As a sample of his safeness and dullness we may quote the following which ranks among his better efforts:

I have written that I found  
Pity in the thin, high sound  
Of a bullet on its way  
To make a midnight in the day  
Mercy in the lurking snare  
And angels in a woman's hair.

Professor Andrew Cunningham McLaughlin, whose book *The Constitutional History of the United States* was voted the "best" in history is semi-liberal. His opinions resolve into a justification of judicial power with the qualification that judges ought to be good men and not abuse that power.

The play choice, *Idiot's Delight*, by Robert Sherwood, is an anti-war play. It goes so far as to expose a munitions maker as a war maker. It retains, however, the weaknesses of what Professor Charles A. Beard has aptly termed the devil theory of war. A person rather than a class is identified as the war-maker; one man's lust for profits rather than the profit system is made the war cause. This may be a necessary simplification for dramatic purposes, but the symbol could have been clearer had the play derived from a stronger sense of class conflicts. Nevertheless it is a gain that an anti-war play has been honored. As one looks over this year's current theater production, it is clear that the committee's liberal gesture was involuntary. The plays with enough quality to make them eligible, were none of them very respectable. The Pulitzer committee made its own "lesser evil" choice. It is significant that of the several anti-war plays available for selection, *Idiot's Delight* was the one which made the least attempt to suggest any possibility of a way out.

ISIDOR SCHNEIDER.

## American Song, Revised

*BREAK THE HEART'S ANGER*, by Paul Engle. Doubleday, Doran & Co. \$2.

AMERICAN SONG was the poetic traumatism of a boy crying for an ideal. *Break the Heart's Anger* begins with a passionate indictment of the dollar that has destroyed the dream, of the greed that has robbed and betrayed a land once beautiful. Engle humanizes and harangues his "cauliflower-eared" Chicago, riot-bruised San Francisco, jittery New York; takes Atlantic passage and, with the faith of a young Candide, goes traveling. "Hamlet-land" first: London, Oxford. It will be remembered

that in a review of *American Song* Mr. J. Donald Adams of the N. Y. Times Book Review piously hoped that his protege's residence in "the ancient mellowness of Oxford" would "deepen his national consciousness." It has.

But instead of vacation-browsing under an Oxford elm, dreaming of the cornfields in Iowa, Paul Engle crosses the Channel and looks at Europe. Be it said to his credit that he knows what to look at in foreign parts these days: London's unemployed, "watching the curb for cigarette-butts" while the Jubilee goes on; Vienna, full of "women

beggars with their empty eyes"; Germany, ruled "by bludgeon and the bloody knife." He apostrophizes Karl Marx, "who wrote of money, having none himself," and who had a good idea: that "every worker has the right to work." The Old World is just as doleful as America. Hence Engle (writing from Walchensee, Bavaria) takes a spiritual flight to Russia:

Here, America, another land  
Boned like you with plunging space and blooded  
With the broad arteries of pounding rivers  
Beating with a swift current's pulse, has hurled  
Back its head with dark, half-Eastern eyes  
And flung into the clenched teeth of the world  
A new, a towering and a mighty song.

But here Engle's love of rhetoric, of emotional forensics, runs away with him. In-

stead of making a thoughtful, reasonable evaluation of the new life in Soviet Russia and the possible application of these values toward the deliverance of his own country, he blissfully creates (with little sense of historical accuracy) these generalized parallels: Russia and America, Lenin and Lincoln, Trotsky and Washington!

After some impassioned interludes at Notre Dame and Belleau Wood, the traveler returns, watering the "dry month" of Eliot's Gerontion with his tears:

Yet who am I,  
A lone man bitter that his head is tired,  
His heart's old anger broken by his grief.

Because he has youth, vigor and certain honest potentialities as a poet, this reviewer

would like to see him make a clean break from the romantic, I-suffer-for-my-country, adolescent attitude that has characterized too much American writing. Heart and head are not yet working harmoniously: Engle apparently still sees nothing inconsistent in such contradictory, social-angled passages as the following:

The clear expression of the human thing  
In the social multitude, and in the lone  
Individual with his single way  
That is our self-created destiny,—

Democracy, where individual, man  
Has the inalienable right to starve  
To lose a job and never get it back.

Fortunately, however, he is in a state of development as a poet. His emotional and mental patterns have not yet definitely crystallized. In order to work out of his present confusions, it is to be hoped that he will get a more accurate, detached view of the present in terms of the past; and that he will put behind him his over-fondness for bombastic, book-borrowed phrases and image-clichés. He should by all means do more in the line of the lyric passages that conclude each travel-section of the book. The following, from "Chicago," though some of its figures are derivative, indicates that here his thought is more concise, dynamic, specific; his emotion not emptily exhaled, but controlled and directed:

Here was a town—  
Now a litter  
Of steel and rocks  
In a fertile field  
Where the cricket mocks  
The earth unhealed—  
That hung its men  
On a golden cross  
To double the yield  
Of watered stocks  
And cut the loss,  
That minted its men  
Into thin dimes  
And spent them wildly  
In what were then  
Madly and mildly  
Called "good times."

RUTH LECHLITNER.

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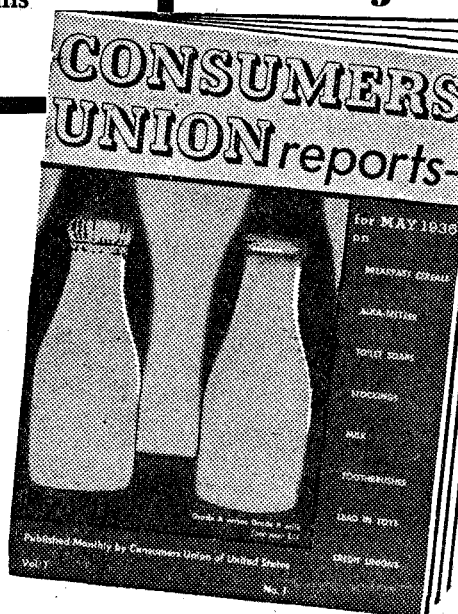
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