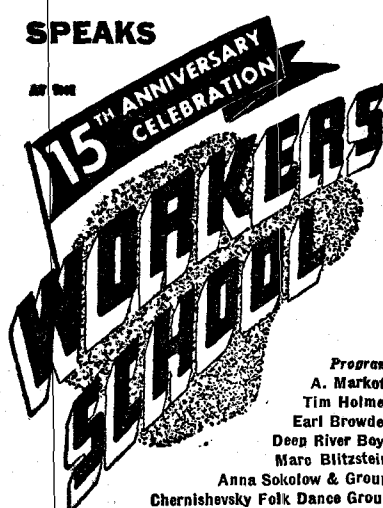


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these are the apparent irreconcilables which many members of the middle classes today are weighing. The longing for untroubled, sensuous living today clashes with a troubled awareness of increasing worldwide poverty and misery. In portraying and confessing the contrasting moods which this conflict creates, Saroyan has touched one of the critical themes of our time. Too few critics have penetrated beneath the Saroyan insouciance to this significant fact.

The present collection adds nothing, except further documentation, to Saroyan's treatment of the conflict. Among the thirty-five pieces, we find the usual cosmological "short stories," a new set of tales about Hollywood, sketches of the sadness and funniness of life, and several moving stories of poverty. The gem of the collection is a story, "Third Grade Citizens," which portrays the impact of the invasion of Ethiopia on an American school teacher and a group of Italian and Negro school children. Another story, "Some Day I'll Be a Millionaire," does an outstanding job in describing the strange feelings and forlorn hopes of an unemployed couple. As a whole, however, the stories are marred by the formlessness, the excesses, and the exaggerated mannerisms characteristic of an unsettled point of view.

Few stories suggest that Saroyan has cultivated any skill in handling dramatic materials. Most of the stories are undeveloped still-life shots. Lyrical-philosophical warblings about life constantly intrude. Saroyan the wiseacre looms everywhere—in the catch-phrase titles, the erratic characters, the absurd incidents. The highly insistent combination of an inexhaustible sense of the sad and funny, the cosmic and the commonplace, the timeless and temporal, leads to a juxtaposition of contrasts endlessly repeated. Overuse has in fact made whatever devices Saroyan has contributed to the liberation of short-story form and prose seem ineffective.

Both as a writer and a person, Saroyan's great need is for integration of the false alternatives he has long been evaluating. Since *Inhale and Exhale* he has been vividly stating the problem. He has yet to discover that personal living and satisfaction are possible within the orbit of necessary social action. To encompass this realization requires more than delicate senses and a great heart.

ARNOLD SHUKOTOFF.

Social Insurance

INSECURITY: A CHALLENGE TO AMERICA, by Abraham Epstein. Random House. \$4.

THE volume under review is the second revised edition of Abraham Epstein's study of the philosophy and technique of social insurance as it emerges from the experiences of our industrial society in the last fifty years. The new edition is distinguished



Plate 3: Pierrot and Harlequin (Cezanne)

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for its comprehensive analysis and its uncompromisingly destructive criticism of the principles of the U. S. Social Security Act.

The author is not only one of the foremost American students of social insurance, he is also one of its front-line veteran fighters. His militant advocacy of social insurance dates from the years of the post-war reaction and the present volume is in a way a summary of the results of more than twenty years of hard thinking and determined action in his chosen field. We must add our voice to that of many others in praise of the unusual comprehensiveness and clarity of exposition of its subject matter. At the same time we must admit that we are deeply disturbed and dissatisfied with some of the implications of this study and particularly with the author's hypercritical attitude towards the efforts of the New Deal in constructing a social security program.

As Mr. Epstein points out, and as we readily admit, the New Deal Social Security program violates almost every established principle of social insurance. Despite this we know that it has been tremendously effective in arousing the American people to the battle for real social security and that it is one of the main rallying grounds for the forces of progressive labor and the masses generally in this battle. It is also clear that the program is the concentration point for the opposition of all the deadly enemies of social security who, unable to make a frontal assault, seek to undermine the progressive forces by hypocritical advocacy of "genuine" social security in place of the alleged fake social security of the New Deal. Now where does Mr. Epstein stand in this battle? Apparently he can see only the amazing number of deficiencies in the New Deal program, and his criticism, instead of being in a friendly and sympathetic spirit, is suffused with hostile overemphasis of its weaknesses.

With most of Mr. Epstein's objections to the social security program, we are in hearty agreement. The act, instead of setting up self-respecting minimum health-and-decency benefit standards, operates to a large degree on the private insurance principle of "the more or less you pay, the more or less you get." The result is that those who need social security most get the least; for example, the long-time unemployed, the present aged, agricultural, domestic, and migratory workers. Instead of a nationwide integrated system of unemployment insurance and relief, we have fifty-two unemployment systems, one national relief system, and a welter of local relief systems. The inevitable result has been an almost complete breakdown in the administration of unemployment insurance. Instead of being financed mainly out of excessive incomes of the wealthy, the act is financed to a very large degree out of the workers' pay checks.

Mr. Epstein's criticism of the financing provisions of the Social Security Act deserves close scrutiny. He is, on good grounds, opposed to both the worker's and the employer's payroll tax. However, he seems to us to be much more emphatic in his opposition to the latter tax than to the former. He argues

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that the employers will pass the tax on to the workers by raising prices or by reducing payrolls through technological improvements. In fact, he trots out all the stock arguments usually used to prove that workers cannot gain anything by fighting for wage increases. Fundamentally, the argument appears to be that employers can always prevent a reduction in business profits. Now no one denies that employers have ways and means which are frequently successful to prevent such reductions. But their power is limited, if not by national then by international competition, and by governmental tariff and fiscal policies. It can be further limited by monopoly legislation, consumers' cooperation, and other devices. The people, if they have a responsive government, can control the level of business profits. The division of the national income is affected by the strength of the various social classes and does not depend solely on the will of the employers. Although, as the foregoing argument indicates, we believe that the danger of the employer's payroll tax is overrated, we agree with Mr. Epstein that progressive income taxation is a much preferable alternative. We would not, however, regard the so-called "broadening of the tax base," for example, as an improvement over the employer's payroll tax.

The reserve provisions of the Social Security Act also draw heavy fire from Mr. Epstein. He explains, correctly enough, that the actuarial type of reserve of the private insurance business is out of place in a social insurance system. He sees the reserve provisions of the Social Security Act as a device to postpone payment of insurance benefits. Since they are accumulated to a large extent through taxes on workers' wages they also tend to deflate purchasing power. The idea that reserves will in future years reduce costs he regards as purely illusory.

Despite the soundness of Mr. Epstein's arguments there is a good deal that can be said for a system of reserves for old-age insurance. If this country had a stabilized distribution of its various age groups and the present aged were not discriminated against, then the proportion of the national income required for payment of old-age benefits would not vary much from year to year. But the situation in this country is that the proportion of aged is increasing very rapidly and it is inevitable that old-age insurance benefits will require an ever increasing share of the national income. The security of the social security system requires that some provision be made which will at least partly guarantee that the requisite share will be available. A social insurance reserve system, not necessarily analogous to the private actuarial systems, could be set up to help accomplish this. A prime requirement of such a system would be that the reserves be accumulated by means of progressive income taxation. Supposing the reserves were invested only in government bonds (they could be invested in real income-earning projects), the result would be to transfer a portion of the outstanding government debt, which would

have otherwise been owned by private interests, to the ownership of the social security fund (i.e., to the people insured). That portion of government income which would otherwise have to be used to pay interest on the aforesaid government debt to private interests would now be available for the social security program. True, there would be no increase in the nation's real income or diminution in the real cost of the benefits of the social security program. However, under our existing institutions, there would be a very real increase in the share of the national income available for social security purposes.

It seems to us a weakness of this otherwise fine work that the author has failed to see that there is a kernel of soundness in the New Deal's idea of social insurance reserves. We cannot help feeling that here, at least, his unsympathetic attitude has affected the fairness of his appraisal.

J. ROLAND.

★

Brief Reviews

THE OXFORD ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE, edited by William Rose Benét and Norman Holmes Pearson. Oxford University Press. \$6.

In their preface to this "historical selection from the literary expression of the American people," the editors state their specific concern with *literary values*. They feel that esthetic judgment of American letters has been neglected, and that it is time to present writers as writers rather than as symptoms of deism, humanitarianism, social trends, and so on. As a corrective to the conventional assumption that we must cover up the "esthetic inferiority" of American literature by stressing its superior interest as "history," this approach is proper. There are corresponding dangers in pushing the esthetic thesis too far, of course; but the inclusion of a passage from John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*, William Ellery Leonard's poem on Tom Mooney, and Archibald MacLeish's "Speech to Those Who Say Comrade," suggests the editors' awareness that social relevance and creative art are far from being incompatible. On the other hand, this antidote to the crude-classification type of anthology does not establish a positive critical principle which unifies esthetic and historical factors, and that is the really difficult and necessary job for the modern anthologist.

The poems of Melville and the prose of Whitman are far once adequately represented. Emily Dickinson looms larger than usual. So do Crane, James, Santayana, and Elinor Wylie. Much space is devoted to the poets of the pre-war renaissance and to the story-tellers of the twenties. The editors have skillfully avoided responsibility for making selections from the younger writers of the present decade. It is disappointing to find that not one writer born since 1900 is represented.

SAMUEL SILLEN.

AMERICAN AUTHORS, 1600-1900, edited by Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft. H. W. Wilson Co. \$5.

This is an extremely useful one-volume biographical dictionary of American literature. Approximately thirteen hundred authors are treated in sketches which range from 150 to 2,500 words. The critical judgment of the editors is sound, for the most part; but the reader will be particularly grateful for the patience and care with which the main biographical facts have been assembled. The volume features four hundred photographically reproduced portraits, many of them rare and hitherto unpublished. Students, teachers, and librarians will find this a very handy desk reference.

R. M. SIMS.