

# The New REPUBLIC

## Fall Literary Review

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### Keeping Step

TO speak of literature without reference to the war would be a joy. It would also be an affectation. Literature becomes a reality as an interaction between the author and the reader, and no sophisticated reader scans a book today who is not pervaded by the war. The old conception of human relations, of international ethics, of national consciousness, of the citizen's place in the state, of self-assertion and self-sacrifice, had been formed by the present generations on a certain established order, an order that wars had affected but had very partially revised. This war has changed it all. It has not re-written Dickens and Blake and Spenser. It has not altered a line of Dante or the Greek anthology. But it is revising the imaginations that respond to such souls. The war is ploughing contemporary imagination with shell and shrapnel. It is ripping it with steel. It is wrenching the foundations of comfort and testing the foundations of faith. Nothing that preceded 1914 will in the end be unqualified by this convulsion of the world. The expressions will not be different, but they will impress a different mind in men.

The wish precedes the idea, and it is the effort of men everywhere to establish at once their personal vision of the war. The old conceptions altered, it is the aim of novelists, poets, philosophers, psychologists, men of religion, men of worldly affairs, to rush forward a new conception—a conception based in most cases on the strength of their desires. This first convulsion in literature means only that the war is being fought out on paper as well as in the trenches, that writing men are seeking with their own weapons to establish those "truths" for which their compatriots are giving their lives. This confusion of current literature adds to the confusion of minds torn by the conflict. The task of criticism at such a time is bewildering. Critics who themselves are revising their conceptions are driven to attempt interpretation. It seems like an effort to measure with a sieve.

But however difficult it may be to conceive the world readjusted on a basis not frantically partisan, there is a process in mankind that does make for tenable ideas. A wounded world is in one respect like a wounded body. It excites forces within it-

self that seek to repair or offset the wound. The red corpuscles have their strict spiritual analogy. There are men who, in the very midst of afflicted society, write with an instinctive effort to reconstruct a social conception of the world. It is not that these men also have not been challenged by the war for their decision as to the meaning of life. The war has brought in its own fashion a day of judgment. It has compelled men to nominate definitely their idea of good and evil, and to decide whether they will live and die by that choice. The easiest decision, the decision not to decide, is in itself fateful. It commits its makers to accept events they might have turned. But every man who is not partisan is not thereby a Laodicean. Men are needed who will primarily do what they can toward making a new conception that will hold.

If criticism can discriminate faithfully between the literature that is thus looking forward and the literature that refuses to look forward, it has helped in a far-reaching crisis. It has prepared the mind to work with the forces of life.

It is not the war alone, however, that asks for such criticism. It is the whole process of industrialism and social interrelation that made possible this war. To assimilate life to new art is no easier a task than to assimilate life to new ideas. The whole tendency of men is to fight against any such change. If industrialism brings with it a modern urban civilization, mechanistic and inflexible, men naturally resist the notion that there is beauty or can be beauty in its ungrateful conditions. It is the task of criticism to encourage such artists as reveal the beauty in these obligatory novelties of life. What men live by they come to adapt æsthetically. Even in the trenches the soldiers strive to make or find an æsthetic response. A "love of beauty" should not, consequently, be confined to the orthodox forms. If beauty appear anywhere, in the least ingratiating surroundings or in the "sudden splendor" of the most unpromising lives, the genuine critic will rejoice in it. By seeking to impose on life the conditions that seem to us pregnant with beauty, we do something to cultivate it. But we do more to cultivate it by recognizing it in those conditions imposed by life itself. It is not easy to modify the economic activities in which men most readily make their living. But it is imperative to

detect in those activities the human aptitude for beauty. The best criticism is that which loves life so well as to take beauty as it comes.

An intenser perception of the present crisis will in the end affect America as a whole. So far our provincialism has not coped with the crisis. The result of it will therefore be more likely to strike the great American people in other regions than the illuminated heart or the vivified mind. But this makes the sophisticated judgment more consequential than ever. It should impel the readers of books to pay every heed to genuine criticism. It should impel every critic to know well the life that is the father of all books.

## Reconciling Irreconcilables

*The Reconciliation of Government with Liberty, by John W. Burgess. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. \$2.50 net.*

**D**URING the constitutional and political discussions which culminated in the presidential campaign of 1912, apologists for the traditional American political system were prone to assert that the Constitution and the government of the United States was the final and almost the perfect extract of the accumulated political experience of mankind. It did not invite or permit amendment and improvement. Any change in its essential provisions must be a change for the worse. As an aftermath of the discussion Mr. John W. Burgess has written a book entitled "The Reconciliation of Government with Liberty," specifically for the purpose of proving the American Constitution of some years ago to be the consummate flower of the political wisdom of the world. Just as Hegel considered the Prussian state of his day to be the triumphant result of a long process of rational political evolution, so Mr. Burgess considers the American system to be the most satisfactory solution of the ultimate political problem—the problem of reconciling government with liberty.

Mr. Burgess' method of establishing his thesis is simple. In the first place he assumes without discussion that "it has been the search of the ages to find a political system, the travail of the ages to construct one, in which Government and Liberty shall be reconciled." In the book now being reviewed he records and analyzes the result of this search. He begins with an account of the "effort of Asia" to solve the problem, and he soon reaches the conclusion that to the "genius of Asia," which is religious, the "solution of the problem of the reconciliation of Government and Liberty is clearly extremely difficult, not to say impossible." Having disposed of Asia he turns to the "effort of Europe," which has been sufficiently prolonged and strenuous to require for its analysis about two hundred and fifty pages out of the three hundred and eighty contained in the volume. The Athenian state in his opinion made "a great and promising" attempt to solve the momentous problem; but it seems to have failed because the court of the Areopagus—which acted as a kind of censor of the government in the interest of liberty—was not as independent of popular dictation as is our own Supreme Court. The Grecian effort ended consequently in mere despotism. So did that of Rome, for in the system of the Empire "as finally adjusted by Diocletian there was no place whatever

for the constitutional Liberty of the Individual." During many centuries thereafter the Christian church constituted the only effective check upon governmental despotism. In the same way the author dismisses the political system of the primitive Germans with the condemnation that "it secured Individual Liberty only by participation of the Individual in governmental power"—"a crude and ineffectual way."

It is scarcely necessary to accompany Mr. Burgess on his somewhat dreary journey across the ages of political obscurantism until the dawn of modern constitutionalism. Considering that his method is fundamentally analytic rather than historical, he wastes an enormous amount of space on incomplete summaries of the political history of the several European nations. The result always is either that Liberty is ascendant over Government and anarchy has supervened, or Government has thrown Liberty for a fall, and the nations were plunged into a more or less complete despotism. The significant part of the book is not found in this torturing of history in the interest of its conformity to an orthodox formula, but in the chapters towards the end in which modern constitutional government in Europe and America is described, and its embodiment in the political systems of different countries analyzed and compared.

The extraordinary feature of this phase of Mr. Burgess' discussion is his method of considering modern constitutions not as living bodies of law or structures of government which in their operation have actually succeeded in reconciling government with liberty, but as essays in theoretical constitution-making, which do or do not measure up to what he considers the standards of abstract perfection. These standards are complicated and exacting, and their application results in a series of startling practical judgments. Great Britain is usually supposed to have succeeded in combining more individual liberty with a more authoritative government than any European nation, but according to Mr. Burgess its constitution is radically and hopelessly inferior. It shares with the constitutions of Russia, Austria and Italy the "almost fatal defect" of not possessing "an organized Sovereign back of both Government and Liberty." In this respect the constitution of Switzerland is the only one which furnishes "a fair foundation" for the solution of the ultimate problem. The constitution of Great Britain is also fundamentally defective, because it does not offer a "well-defined sphere of Individual Immunity against governmental power"—that is, a Bill of Rights protected against violation by the legislature. Another almost equally fatal drawback to the British system of government is that of its two legislative bodies one is subordinate to the other, whereas, according to Mr. Burgess, "Political Science insists upon a parity of Powers" between the two parts of a dual legislature. The countries which enjoy the inestimable blessing of two equally powerful legislative bodies are Russia, Germany, Austria, Sweden and Switzerland; and the reason for their political superiority over Great Britain and France is, in Mr. Burgess' opinion, ridiculously simple. They are the states in which "men of intelligence, character, thrift and wealth still occupy stations in political society" warranted by their public services. "They are the states in which the 'higher classes have retained their vigor and courage' and have buckled on 'a spiritual armor,' which gives them the same 'mastery over their fellows that the helmet and breastplate of steel gave their predecessors."

Without going any further into the details of Mr. Burgess' discussion of the "European effort," we can jump to