

## The Genteel Tradition

*The Dwelling-Place of Light, by Winston Churchill.*  
New York: The Macmillan Co. \$1.60.

**F**EW things in America are so disreputable as the I. W. W. To have Mr. Churchill, the most reputable of national novelists, plunge into the thick of their polluted stream amounts to an intellectual challenge. Has it been unfair to consider Mr. Churchill definitely fixable by the aid of that brilliant diagnosis of Mr. George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy*? Or has it been unfair to regard the I. W. W. as lacking in claims on gentility? On the surface, the collocation of Winston Churchill and the I. W. W. upsets one's previous notion of both institutions. It demands investigation, asking either for a new understanding of the labor radicals or a closer definition of the novelist's possibilities.

Grim industrialism in the throes of an I. W. W. strike is surely a theme uncongenial to Mr. Churchill, and, if the supercilious view of him were correct, he would no more attempt to tackle such a subject than Mr. Theodore Dreiser would write a Methodist novel. But where the supercilious fail in their estimate of Mr. Churchill is in supposing that he represents a dead tradition. He is not, it is true, Dionysiac. His is the cautious progressivism of a public trustee. But the singular fact about him, the main element in his success, is the tenacity of his Americanistic vitality. Traditions are viscous and their flexibility is hard to credit, but every novel that Mr. Churchill writes shows his skill at adaptation, his power of accommodating himself and his tradition to new and awkward facts. And it is not merely that he accommodates himself. By virtue of his conscientious nature, he chews hard, he swallows, he assimilates. It is not that his temperament prompts him to seek novelty. He is not adventurous. It is simply that he heroically accepts the fare set before his country and his tradition and invariably manages to survive.

The fare, in this instance, is the Lawrence strike. How can fiction assimilate this strike so that it can give an understandable story to the children of the genteel tradition? There is something big and generous about Mr. Churchill's undertaking such a task. His absence of humor is, of course, a sure sign of his fixity in the tradition out of which, and for which, he is interpreting the new America, but even though he is solemn and responsible in regard to his audience he does not flinch under the stiff requirements of his theme. He starts, quite naturally, with an American rather than an immigrant family, but it is a family that in spite of branching New England ancestry has sunk to ignoble immigrant level and is barely able to keep its chin above water. The head of the house is an amiable incompetent man of fifty-five, Edward Bumpus, who is gatekeeper of the huge Chippering Mill. Finding refuge from reality in genealogical retrospections of the Bumpus family, he does nothing to ameliorate the lives of his driven wife and his two wage-earning daughters. One of these, Lise, is dedicated by Mr. Churchill to the Juggernaut of the imprudent. She is pleasure-loving and vulgar and slangy and cheap. She wants a "good time" and takes it, and is seduced and becomes a prostitute. Mr. Churchill is sorry for her but the symmetry of his novel demands a weak sister. It is the other girl, Janet Bumpus, whose personality is his real concern and whose fate is the gist of his story. It is through her, recognizably a high-spirited and well bred American girl whose lot is cast with the proletariat, that Mr. Churchill strives to realize a condition

which is still rather ungrateful to good Americans.

"Where is the way to the dwelling-place of light?" That is the question asked by Janet's very nature. The great mill town gives her no answer. Its voice is the sharp siren in the gray morning, whipping the sleeper with scorpions. Out of the crowded streets, the miserable tenements, the myriad polyglot operatives, Janet gets no response to her own submerged desires. She is not aware of a class struggle. She has no social consciousness. She is just a valuable human being, according to any conventional reckoning of value, who is compelled to fight for herself in a hideous industrial milieu. What chance is there, provided she is incapable of baseness, of hardness, of acquiescence? Where, for a fine American girl working as stenographer on low wages in a mill town, "where is the way to the dwelling-place of light?"

The agent of the great mill in which Janet works is a red-blood New England business man named Claude Ditmar. "At five and forty he was a vital, dominating, dust-colored man, six feet and half an inch in height, weighing a hundred and ninety pounds, and thus a trifle fleshy. When relaxed, and in congenial company, he looked rather boyish, an aspect characteristic of many American business men of to-day." In this man's office Janet Bumpus (a dreadful name) goes to work. Something about her attracts him. Intent and preoccupied as he is, one brief encounter outside the office decides his interest. She is made his private stenographer; and then, as Mr. Churchill observes, "our stage is set. A young woman, conscious of ability, owes her promotion primarily to certain dynamic feminine qualities with which she is endowed. And though she may make an elaborate pretense of ignoring the fact, in her heart she knows and resents it, while at the same time, paradoxically, she gets a thrill from it—a sustaining and inspiring thrill of power! On its face it is a business arrangement; secretly—attempt to repudiate this as one may—it is tinged with the colors of high adventure."

The possessive Mr. Ditmar finds Janet inflexibly independent. The business of the mill begins to fascinate her, and his power to impress her, but his unimaginative greed for her makes surrender impossible. Her spirited denial of him has, however, the effect of completing his love for her. She wishes to withstand this love, but before she completely comprehends her own motives she yields to him, only to become convinced immediately after, by the simultaneous "ruin" of her sister and outbreak of the strike, that she has been sacrificed to a capitalist-exploiter's greed. The violence of her rebound, under the circumstances, lands her into the ranks of the I. W. W.; stenographer to a red-lipped agitator who proves quite as possessive as the man against whom she takes up arms.

Considering the route by which Mr. Churchill arrives at the I. W. W., a certain frightened gentility might reasonably be looked for. The one character he sees interiorly, Janet, comes to the I. W. W. on the basis of a private grievance, without any pronounced conviction beforehand as to the wrongness of the employers' attitude and without any convincing proof when she gives up Ditmar that her own plight is the same as her sister's. Though he insists that he wants to marry her, she regards herself as outraged. Her pregnancy drives her mad. She even wants to kill him. And the chaos of her feelings is telescoped with her radicalism, mere reaction as it is. But the I. W. W. leaders with whom she associates are seriously reported. Mr. Churchill copes with them in the sense that he models them on actual leaders, and represents their movement as comprehensible and definable—"a decrepit social system in a

moment of lowered vitality becomes an easy prey to certain diseases which respectable communities are not supposed to have." "Loose morals and loose ties!"—Mr. Churchill is not intimidated by these symbols of syndicalism. Even the prattle of his red-lipped agitator is not a perversion. The fundamental limitation is the focusing of the crisis through Janet, an unconvinced American who is I. W. W. by misfortune, not by "fault."

The end of the book sends one back to Mr. Santayana's diagnosis. "America," he said, "is not simply a young country with an old mentality: it is a country with two mentalities, one a survival of the beliefs and standards of the fathers, the other an expression of the instincts, practice, and discoveries of the younger generations. In all the higher things of the mind—in religion, in literature, in the moral emotions—it is the hereditary spirit that still prevails, so much so that Mr. Bernard Shaw finds that America is a hundred years behind the times. The truth is that one-half of the American mind, that not occupied intensely in practical affairs, has remained, I will not say high-and-dry, but slightly becalmed; it has floated gently in the back-water, while, alongside, in invention and industry and social organization, the other half of the mind was leaping down a sort of Niagara Rapids. This division may be found symbolised in American architecture: a neat reproduction of the colonial mansion—with some modern comforts introduced surreptitiously—stands beside the skyscraper. The American Will inhabits the sky-scraper; the American Intellect inherits the colonial mansion. The one is the sphere of the American man; the other, at least predominantly, of the American woman. The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition." It is to the genteel tradition, at any rate, that Janet escapes. Mr. Churchill intimates that she is broken by her tragic experiences, and out of his goodwill he commiserates those experiences. But it is to the genteel tradition that she flies. In it she finds herself and is at home.

If *The Dwelling-Place of Light* were insincere, this adherence to tradition would destroy its substantiality. As it is, faithful though it is to the antiquated, the largeness of the considerations that it attempts to master gives it an eminence of its own. At times unspeakably clumsy, seldom or never comedic, it has the strength that always goes with straightforwardness, and it is too often mellow and tender in spirit not to be deemed fine as well as large. Mr. Churchill will never escape from gentility. He has achieved his position as its favorite interpreter. But the vitality shown in *The Dwelling-Place of Light* proves how persistent is his faith in its tenets. He can make a place for the I. W. W. in his tradition rather than give up an American mill or an American girl.

F. H.

## A New Spirit in Poetry?

*The New Poetry, an Anthology, edited by Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson. New York: The Macmillan Co. \$1.75.*

THE New Poetry, as it names itself, not without an air of conscious defiance like most new movements, prides itself on its difference, its will to be simple and sincere. It is come, Miss Monroe tells us in her introduction, to deliver poetry from the "theory, abstraction and remoteness" into which she alleges it has fallen. It aims to be "less vague, less eloquent" than much poetry of the past, and to "widen the scope of the art" by "presenting the concrete ob-

ject or the concrete environment," and "seeks to give more precisely the emotion arising from them." It voluntarily renounces "archaic diction" and "the shop-worn subjects of past history and legends."

All this is quite admirable, as is any attempt to win for poetry new aspects of truth, new experience of spirit, new powers of expression. Honest efforts to increase the honor and glory of poetry deserve all respect and sympathy. Respect and sympathy one is happy to accord to many of the contributors to this volume, only regretting that the crown of success cannot be so generally awarded. By their works shall you know them is the first canon of criticism in art. By its works must the "new poetry" be judged, and only secondarily by its intentions, its formulae, or the advisability of the reforms it advocates. Practice, not theory, is what counts in poetry, is what makes poetry.

The new movement would be unfettered. Healthily enough, it questions rules. And it aims to be "concrete," not seeing that it has begun to forge its own shackles in the very determination to be such. By being so concrete it has closed to itself whole realms of poetic inspiration quite as genuine, actual, near at hand and unexhausted as those it sets out to explore. To be "objective" is one great purpose of the new school, the introduction claims. It is not then without significance, perhaps, that the poems in their book which are most instinct with real poetic feeling, in whatever form expressed, are just those which are least objective, least concerned with presenting the concrete object or the concrete environment. It is not without significance also that the best things in the volume are almost all cast in forms either "old" or approaching the "old," with rhyme, "iambic" meter (so called) and other paraphernalia not new. The radicals have not yet at least proved their case.

Sleep, gray brother of death,  
Has touched me,  
And passed on.

I arise, facing the East—  
Pearl-doored sanctuary  
From which light,  
Hand-linked with dew and fire,  
Dances. . . .

There is little concrete or "objective," as Miss Monroe uses the word, in these beautiful lines by Joseph Campbell, or in his *At Harvest* and *The Old Woman*, while *Hate*, by James Stephens, which follows, can cause no least qualm to the most bigoted conservative:

My enemy came nigh,  
And I  
Stared fiercely in his face.  
My lips went writhing back in a grimace,  
And stern I watched him with a narrow eye.  
Then, as I turned away, my enemy,  
That bitter heart and savage, said to me:  
"Some day, when this is past,  
When all the arrows that we have are cast,  
We may ask one another why we hate,  
And fail to find a story to relate,  
It may seem to us then a mystery  
That we could hate each other."  
Thus said he,  
And did not turn away,  
Waiting to hear what I might have to say.  
But I fled quickly, fearing if I stayed,  
I might have kissed him as I would a maid.