

American Criticism and Christian Science

The Cambridge History of American Literature. Vols. III. and IV. Edited by W. P. Trent, John Erskine, Stuart P. Sherman, Carl Van Doren. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

THE concluding two volumes of The Cambridge History of American Literature begin with a chapter on Mark Twain and end with a chapter on the Amerind. Between the true original and the true aboriginal are many matters but not many masters. Without the first two volumes, and even with them, it is impossible to get the comprehensive view which the editors doubtless had in mind when they planned the four volumes. The preface to this section, or half, or division, though it softens censure and invites patience, does not give us our bearings. Volume III is Book III (continued): Later National Literature: Part II, and begins with Chapter VIII. Volume IV is Book III (continued): Later National Literature: Part III, pagination continuous from Vol. III, and ends with a chapter on the Aboriginal. I was about to set forth the proposition that beginning with Mark Twain, as these volumes begin, there are only three or four other outstanding figures in the history of American literature, Henry James, William James, Howells, and Hamilton Wright Mabie; and then having got safely past Jack London and George M. Cohan, I come to a chapter on Lincoln! It took a crowd of learned editors to make a confusion like that. American literature may be poor and sickly but it is not sprawled over time and space with its heels above its head.

Suppose we keep our chronological sense and begin with the generation of Samuel L. Clemens and Henry Adams and come down to the youngest men mentioned in these volumes, such as Mr. Robert Frost, Mr. Vachel Lindsay, and Powhatan, whose speech was not interrupted except by the carrying out of the dead body (see Vol. IV, Bk. III, Part III, Chap. xxxii, page 613). It is a dispiriting record. The dreariness is in part due to the editors, who, being doctors of philosophy and professors of literature, lack philosophic insight and a vital sense of literature and who have inevitably chosen as fellow-contributors their own unimaginative kind. The best chapters are those on subjects in which the professor is most at home and has an intellectual right to speak, such as history, education, philosophy, scholarship. As for the art of letters, even when these learned gentlemen have an interesting subject, such as Mark Twain and Henry James, they do their academic best to miss it, and their aim is good.

But on the whole the dullness of the essays is due largely to the flatness of the material and to the historian's obligation to include for the sake of completeness writers of no interest except to the historian and, to judge from the results, not of much interest to him. The middle and later years of the intellectual history of America cannot be matter for a luminous record because there are so few lights for the historian to reflect. There are some real lights—let us insist on that, lest we die of patriotic chagrin—one or two of first magnitude, and several of lesser power but of undeniable brilliance from the first "Beloved Twain" of the Zuni Indians to Mr. Abraham Cahan. Not even professorial fog can extinguish them. Nevertheless the prevailing stupidity of these sections of this history is a quality inseparable from historical accuracy.

Is this unfair? I call as witness the author of one of the best chapters in these two volumes of this book, Dr. Morris R. Cohen, a Yankee historian who writes with perception and authority on Later Philosophy. He says: "An examination of the catalogues of American colleges will bear out the picture of dismal unenlightenment which Stanley Hall drew in 1879 of the state of philosophic teaching." And Dr. Cohen quotes Professor Gildersleeve's testimony that "in his youth positions as college teachers were generally given to those who had failed in missionary work abroad." Now philosophy, though a large part of human thought, perhaps the whole of it, is at the same time a special department and it is not a complete measure of the intellectual life of a nation. And colleges do not correspond exactly to either the best or the worst in the national mind as a whole. (Mark Twain, Howells and Lincoln owed nothing directly to colleges). Moreover, American colleges have without question improved since the youth of Professor Gildersleeve and the later youth of Dr. Hall, though, to judge from the volumes under inspection, some college professors of today might just as well be missionaries abroad. Yet the state of philosophy and the state of the university have something to do with the state of thinking in the surrounding territory. We have expert testimony that two generations ago and one generation ago two important regions of American thought were in darkness. Professor Hall writes in 1879. Two years later, in 1881, appeared the third, enlarged, edition of Mrs. Eddy's Science and Health. There must be some relation between adjacent obscurities, though, since they are obscurities, the relation may be difficult to see. Whatever the relation, there is nothing incongruous in the fact that a country whose intellectual history for fifty years shows so little courage and individuality is a country where illiterate religions flourish and publishers can be intimidated.

If report be true, the fourth volume of this Cambridge History has been withdrawn from circulation by the publishers on account of the objections raised by successors of Mrs. Eddy and Brigham Young to a chapter by Professor Woodbridge Riley on Popular Bibles. It is a happy accident that the sections of this history which contain Professor Riley's article should begin with a chapter on Mark Twain. For he paid his respects to the Mormons in *Roughing It* fifty years ago and to Mrs. Eddy in *Christian Science*, written toward the end of his life. He would have chuckled over Professor Riley's comments, for example the characterization of Mrs. Eddy as "the thrice-married female Trismegistus"; and he could have found the right words to express contempt for the weakness of Messrs. G. P. Putnam's Sons and for the folly of the Christian Scientists in giving notoriety to an essay which, but for their ill-advised solicitude, might have slumbered almost unnoticed in the depths of a learned work.

Perhaps Mark Twain would have added a chapter to his *Christian Science*, compared to which Professor Riley's article is gentle and generous. But he would have had no occasion to revise his chapter on the Mormon Bible; after half a century that chapter has a deadly finality. The Mormon Bible, he says, is "an insipid mess of inspiration. It is chloroform in print. . . . Whenever he [Joseph Smith] found his speech growing too modern—which was about every sentence or two—he ladled in a few such Scriptural phrases as 'exceeding sore,' 'and it came to pass,' etc., and made things satisfactory again. 'And it came to pass' was his pet. If he had left that out, his Bible would have been only a pamphlet."

Mark Twain was too powerful a man to be suppressed, even by Mrs. Clemens or by the memory of her after her hand was removed (*pace* Mr. Van Wyck Brooks). But he might well have softened some parts of Christian Science to the advantage of the argument. For he abuses his kingly power; he is sometimes a knight jousting in behalf of truth, but he is also sometimes a terrible giant. One cannot help feeling a little sympathy for the tyrannical priestess whose unlovely character he exposed and whose temple he tried to devastate.

Let the issues be clear. The merits and fallacies of Christian Science are not the chief question, really not even a subordinate question. If Mark Twain's book had never been published, if Professor Riley's article had never been published, the world would not be much poorer in wisdom, and probably the Church of Christ Scientist would not be richer by one dollar or one member. It is proverbial, whether true or not, that religions thrive on persecution; and superstition certainly does not yield either to a passionate satirical assault or to a dispassionate critical analysis. But the suppression of Professor Riley's article, after it was published, involves two principles, one of which concerns the intelligence of the censorship committee of the Christian Science organization and the other of which concerns the intelligence, backbone, and morals of Messrs. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

The Christian Scientists are entirely right from an ethical point of view in using any influence they have, short of bribery and corruption, to promote the circulation of ideas favorable to their sect and prevent the circulation of ideas unfavorable to their sect. Every church, every party, every individual has the right to turn to private uses the power of the printed word and to try to ward off the power of the printed word when it seems to be in hostile hands. The Roman Catholic Church has for centuries maintained a sharp censorship. It may have killed some books that deserved to live. But the priests of the church, who are as a rule shrewd students of human nature, devote their efforts chiefly to the guidance of the faithful; and if they try to suppress a book of interest to the rest of us they go about their business in a quiet way and are not so fatuous as to give free advertising to something they wish to lock up in the Index Expurgatorius.

The Church of Rome is a wise old institution. The Church of Christ Scientist is an infant in time and in intelligence. Its censorship committee might have foreseen that the suppression of Professor Riley's article would spread news of it broadcast, and not the whole news, not the whole article in its proper place and proportion, but the most offensive phrases. It is not only contributors to critical weeklies like the Nation and the New Republic who will make something of this episode. An editorial note in Life, not at all unfriendly to the Christian Scientists, quotes the phrase that seems to have stuck hardest in the throats of Mrs. Eddy's followers: "thrice-married female Trismegistus." Dr. Frank Crane, whose syndicated sermons are consumed by multitudes, comes out boldly not against the Christian Scientists but in defense of freedom of criticism. The Christian Scientists have not heard the last of this business; they have started something which cannot help them, though, to be sure, it probably will do them little harm. They ought, however, for their own good, to put in charge of their vigilance committee men of elementary good sense. It ought to be possible to find such men in an organization which

has included so many people, beginning with Mrs. Eddy, who have been successful in business and have had experience in commercial advertising.

The real offender is the house of G. P. Putnam's Sons, who are guilty of pusillanimous conduct, of treachery to an honest critic, of violation of the right of free discussion. If they had had a little courage they would have refused to yield to the importunities of the Christian Scientists or any other sect. If they had been honest to their contributor, Professor Riley, they would have stood behind him on principle with all the prestige of an old and once honorable firm of publishers. Good business men should resent illegitimate interference with their business. Unfortunately these business men will not suffer the kind of punishment business men feel most keenly: loss of money. The episode has given the Cambridge History some extra advertising without expense except the trivial price of a little honor. There is to be a new edition of the fourth volume, without Professor Riley's chapter; and if there are any remaining copies of the suppressed edition, they may become rare, like early editions of Mrs. Eddy's works, and fetch a premium.

JOHN MACY.

Russia's Golden Age

The Memoirs of Count Witte. New York: Doubleday, Page and Co.

TO a reading public submerged in an ocean of literature on the horrors of the Soviet regime, the old regime of the Tsars is coming to look like a Golden Age. Accordingly they will no doubt anticipate a mild, if somewhat sad pleasure from a book by the man who was perhaps best qualified to give a true and sympathetic account of that regime. Count Witte's whole life was devoted to the service of the Tsars, and in the course of that service he held the most elevated offices and won for himself easily first place among the Russian statesmen of the last century. He was an honest man, and therefore was shamefully intrigued against by the wretched satellites of the Court and repeatedly subjected to contemptuous treatment by the Tsar. But his loyalty to the autocracy never wavered.

Count Witte is called Russia's great liberal statesman, but his liberalism deserves the name only in contrast to the black reaction that prevailed under Nicholas. To him autocracy seemed an ideal institution, for Russia. Under it the empire had grown prodigiously great, and would, he hoped, grow greater. He consistently opposed the revolutionary movement, and helped to make a futility of the constitution which Nicholas granted with such magnificent gestures. Even Stolypin of infamous memory was more favorable to a parliamentary regime. At any rate, Count Witte includes in his indictment of this politician "the embodiment of political immorality," who "ruled Russia by violating each and every law and who disdained no means, however reprehensible, to keep himself in power," the charge that "to please the Duma majority he intended to limit the Emperor's prerogatives, in contravention of the fundamental laws of the land."

For all his devotion to autocracy as such Count Witte had no illusions as to the character of the particular autocrat, Nicholas, whom an evil fate had thrust upon Russia at the time when she most desperately needed a man of