

The New Patricians

WE know that the heresy of yesterday becomes the platitude of tomorrow, but that knowledge does not make it perceptibly easier for us to realize how quickly the most radical movement, school or tendency grows *vieux jeu*. It is almost impossible for us to concede that the tentative experiments, the impudent attacks and the culminating revolt in which we fancied ourselves triumphant have hardened into a set of conventions which call for fresh assaults and even more violent revisions. We who were "the young men" less than ten years ago gaze with an incredulity, in which surprise and outrage are mingled, at a younger generation that not only knocks at our doors but threatens to batter down the very structure in which we are just beginning to feel comfortable. But let me change the militant metaphor and attempt to analyze the new alignment in a somewhat less personal and more explicit chronological manner.

Immediately prior to 1910, the literary tone of America was frigidly academic. Hovey and Carman with their lyrical "Off with the fetters!" had merely imposed another short-lived formula of escape. After the brief term of vagabondage, art in America, gorged with the fruits of a fast-multiplying materialism, sank back in a post-prandial torpor. The vigorous puritanism of the ministerial New Englanders was forgotten; the gospel, thinned and sweetened, was dispensed by a succession of shadows, gesturing with polite uniformity. The word of Hamilton Wright Mabie, Richard Watson Gilder, Henry Van Dyke, Robert Underwood Johnson was respected if not revered. The tradition was the tradition of the earlier Cambridge group but it had grown harder, pedantic, dehumanized. It was a gentleman's, almost a schoolman's world that was reflected in the literature of this period: ornate, nostalgic, refined. It was from the very refinement of this aristocratic attitude that the now mature new generation revolted with such vigor. The passionless precision sent them hurtling to the opposite extreme of emotional disorganization. They called for "Life! More life!" Romantics and realists found themselves using each other's slogans; they fought with each other to tell the truth, the whole truth and—unfortunately too often—nothing but the truth. Leading the novelists, Dreiser and Anderson, leading the poets, Masters, Lindsay and Sandburg spoke with a democratic fervor; theirs was a passion not only for revelation but for communication. In their desire to talk directly to people, they, like most of their contemporaries, were concerned less with aesthetics than with instinct, more with feeling than with form.

It is against what seems to many of the young *élite* to be an undisciplined emotionalism that the latest generation is revolting. Seeing the immediate past and much of the present as a welter of soft ecstasies and inchoate naturalism, they respond to the full swing of the inevitable pendulum. They are all—or at least their manifestos are—for a new intellectual discipline, for severity of structure, for the subjection of the material to the design. Form is the word most often on the lips of these younger writers; they speak of the mathematics, the architecture of literature, of mass and planes, of suspensions and modulations—of an abstract form, as a musician, despising the theatricalism of opera, might speak of absolute music. It is in essence a patrician attitude that places its emphasis on "style, strangeness, organization." It is primarily a turning away from naturalism, a progression—or, as may be contended, a retrogression—to French ideas of a still earlier generation. Our newest "new men," with their aristocratic *malaises* seeking decorative avenues of escape, may well become a set of belated American Parnassians. But there is this difference between the two periods: Frenchmen, since Flaubert, have adopted the theory that the purpose of art is to conceal art; the young American doctrinaires—and I am thinking chiefly of the more determined secessionists—believe that the function of art is to reveal art, carefully, consciously. This, it seems to me, explains their preoccupation with verbal craftsmanship and deliberate technique. The word aesthete does not have for them, as it had for us, the connotations of Oscar Wilde and the delicately decadent nineties; they speak of a rigorous and crystallized aestheticism.

How far, one asks, can such a program carry them? As in the case of Pound who started his career with a burst of brilliance, is it not likely that an obsession with structure may lead to imaginative sterility? When emotion is minimized or deprecated, does not the artist suffer from a lassitude of the creative faculty? Even now, although it is scarcely fair to pass judgment on a group that is still fluid, one notes that most of its output has been critical—I think of Edmund Wilson, Jr., Kenneth Burke, Malcolm Cowley, Gorham B. Munson—and this prompts a perplexity of fresh questions. If instinct is repudiated or impoverished can the intelligence be a sufficient substitute? Will not intellectual subtleties and nuances of form tend toward the very artistic decadence from which we have revolted, the decadence that appraises the values of life chiefly as aesthetic values?

Such questions would doubtless be answered by the younger men themselves with little unanimity.

For, apart from appearing together upon the planks of their hastily built platform, there is little agreement among them. Even the group that dominates Secession—that most insurgent of periodicals, edited in Brooklyn and published in Vienna—has little unity of aim. Kenneth Burke is a candid and complete cerebralist; Matthew Josephson, on the other hand, is straight dada, accepting the dadaists' denial of logic and their glorification of incoherence; Malcolm Cowley's partisanship, apart from his experiments as a poet, is more definite and critical; Gorham Munson accepts dada's exploitation of the materials created

by the machine's impact on human life but rejects its arbitrary symbols and elaborate formlessness. There are others, still younger and unaffiliated, to reply to such interrogations: E. E. Cummings, attempting a primitive simplification of visual as well as tangential sensations, John Dos Passos who seems to be moving along altogether different channels than those charted in *Three Soldiers*, John Wheelwright, Foster Damon, Hart Crane are among those who are declaring themselves in print. They have prompted the questions. Their work must supply the answers.

LOUIS UNTERMAYER.

The Mountain Cat

Inscribed to Stephen Graham

I read the aspens like a book, every leaf
was signed.

Then I climbed above the aspen-grove,
reading what I could find,

On Mount Clinton Colorado. And I
met a mountain cat.

I will call him Andrew Jackson, and I
mean no harm by that.

He was growling, and devouring a ter-
rific mountain rat.

But when the feast was ended, the
mountain-cat was kind,

And showed a pretty smile, and spoke
his mind.

"I am dreaming of old Boston," he said,
and wiped his jaws.

"I have often heard of Boston," and he
folded in his paws—

"Boston, Massachusetts, a mountain bold
and great.

I will tell you all about it, if you care to
curl and wait.

"In the Boston of my beauty-sleep, when
storm-flowers

Are in bloom,

When storm-lilies, and storm-roses, and
storm-lilacs are in bloom,

The faithful cats go creeping through the
cat-nip ferns

And gloom

And pounce upon the Boston mice, that
tremble underneath the roses,

And pounce upon the Boston rats, and
drag them to the tomb.

For we are tom-policemen vigilant and
sure.

*Some words
about singing
this song are
written this
border along:*

*If I cannot
sing in the as-
pen's tongue*

*If I know not
what they say*

*Then I have
never gone to
school,*

*And have
wasted all my
day.*

*Come let us
whisper of
men and
beasts*

*And joke as
the aspens do.*

*And yet be
solemn in*

their way,

*And tell our
thoughts*

*All summer
through,*

In the morning

In the frost;

*In the mid-
night dew.*

*The mountain
cat seems
violent
And of no*

We keep the Back Bay ditches and potato
cellars pure.

Apples are not bitten into, cheese is let
alone.

Sweet corn is left upon the cob and the
beef left on the bone.

Every Sunday morning, the Pilgrims
give us codfish balls

Because we keep the poisonous rodents
from the Boston halls."

And then I contradicted him, in a man-
ner firm and flat.

"Not in all of Boston are there hunting
scenes like that."

"So much the worse for Boston," said
the whiskery mountain-cat.

And the cat continued his great dream, closing one shrewd
eye:—

"The Tower-of-Babel cactus blazes above the sky.

Fangs and sabres guard the buds and crimson fruits on
high.

Yet the cactus-eating eagles and black hawks hum through
the air.

When the pigeons weep in Copley Square, look up, those
wings are there,

Proud Yankee birds of prey, overshadowing the land,

Screaming to younger Yankees of the self-same brand—

Whose talk is like the American flag, snapping on the
summit pole

Sky-rocket and star spangled words, round sunflower
words, they use them whole.

There are no tailors in command, men seem like trees in
honest leaves.

Their clothes are but their bark and hide and sod and
binding for their sheaves.

Men are as the shocks of corn, as natural as alfalfa fields.

*good intent
Yet read his
words so
gently*

*No bird will
leave its tree*

*No child will
hate the simper*

or the noise

*And hurry
away from
you and me.*

*Read like a
gnarled medi-
tative*

*Cat-like wil-
low-tree.*