

youth, but he was sure that it would bring him a glory and fulfillment he had never known," there is not much left for him in describing a circumstance a little out of the ordinary.

Bernard De Voto has called "Of Time and the River" an example of manic depression, infantile regression, and a compulsion neurosis. This is hardly literary criticism, but there are certainly many symptoms of all of these. Eugene on his first coming to Harvard is driven to reading with a maniacal fury. Later, in Dijon, when he has left his weak friend Starwick, he writes with the same impetus for fourteen to twenty hours a day. People never talk in quiet voices, they shout, howl, or cackle at the slightest happening, and the steak at Durgin Park is described with the same finality as his dead father's hands.

But Wolfe cannot be dismissed a psychological freak. In many isolated passages he shows his ability to be of a high order. When he has finished this novel of his life, for it appears from the title page that there are many volumes forthcoming, he may have objectified his experience to the extent of being able to create many inter-related characters, which will be the better for having been founded on so many sensitively absorbed personalities.

With the widening of his experience his view of America will become less self-conscious, and if he shows the same common sense that he used in fleeing to Europe from lionization this last March, there is no reason why he cannot go farther toward expressing Romantic America than any novelist living today.

JOHN SLOCUM

*HE SENT FORTH A RAVEN.* By Elizabeth Madox Roberts. Viking, \$2.50.

TWO, at least, of the genuinely distinguished novels of our generation have been written by Elizabeth Madox Roberts, one historical, the other contemporary, and both of her native Kentucky. These are "The Great Meadow" and "The Time of Man," the second of which has just now made its appearance in the Modern Library with a fine introduction by J. Donald Adams.

With this securely established reputation, both keen interest and high expectations awaited the publication of Miss Roberts' recent work of long fiction, "He Sent Forth a Raven." It is a book which she polished and repolished for five years, and in seeking a reason for its obscurities I thought that perhaps it lost its edge somewhere along the way, as the writer's subtly suggestive method became more and more refined in working it over. For it must be said that, in spite of certain obvious good qualities — such as the mellifluous prose, in

which the brief descriptive passages have the evocative power of poetry—Miss Roberts has drifted in this novel so far from the world of common things and average experiences that it will, I believe, puzzle more readers than it satisfies and edifies.

In some of her minor fiction and in a good many of her short stories this tendency has been patent for a long time, and it is, perhaps inherent in the kind of fusion of poetry and realism that is the core of her method. My own feeling is that the essential truth of life is best realized in art by this very blending which, when most successful, makes for writing of profound power to move and stir both the intellect and the emotions.

But if we may take it as a fair statement that an author should make his meaning reasonably clear, should put his intention into such terms as do not make severe and unreasonable demands upon the sensibility and understanding of the reader, I think there is no other verdict to be reached upon "*He Sent Forth a Raven*" than that it is an artistic failure, and that Miss Roberts runs into the serious danger of losing her following if she continues in her present vein. This would be a loss to literature of no mean proportions and one to be greatly deplored. For without the completion of the circle—without, that is, appreciation and understanding from the reader—the writer's task is not done, nor can it bring the right sort of satisfaction merely because the creator himself understands his work.

Because of my profound respect for Miss Roberts' talents I read the present novel twice over and with concentrated care; at the end I was still baffled. A glimpse of meaning here and there, some recognition of the symbolism, some suspicion that perhaps I knew what the author was trying to say was, to be entirely frank, the most I was able to get. There is always a chance that a reviewer may be insensitive to a certain writer's manner of speech, but after I had completed my second reading of "*He Sent Forth a Raven*," I read a number of reviews and found that the issue was either entirely evaded or else the reviewer admitted that while he liked Miss Roberts' writing her aim was not disclosed.

One of the features of the book that lifts it at once from the realm of reality is the strangeness of its characters. Stoner Drake, about whom the story is built, is a successful farmer, a man of strength and ability, who upon the death of his second wife takes an oath that he will never set foot upon the ground again. His peculiarity is not limited to this quirk. On one occasion when his daughter, Martha, returns from a horseback ride with her sweetheart, he abuses her beyond measure, and the lover withdraws like a soundly whipped dog, leaving the girl completely at the mercy of her psychopathic parent. One of Drake's companions is a carpenter who has written

a book on the universe called "The Cosmograph" and who talks such wild and high-flown language as would mark him at once as madder, perhaps, even than Drake. Still another is a queer wandering preacher named Johnny Briggs.

The period covered is the early years of the century up through the war, and there is a running commentary on farming in its relation to world affairs — a sort of brief history of Kentucky agriculture which can hardly be considered of any importance for itself. Miss Roberts shuttles back and forth in time in a manner that does not make her book any easier to understand; it is an effort to keep up with these flittings which do not seem to have any other sound reason except that the narrative is badly organized.

Sharing the honors of the center of the stage with Drake is his granddaughter Jocelle, and it is the developing of this girl, charming, but as a character very shadowy, which gives the tale what unity it has. Jocelle is the raven, Drake the Noah; it is his habit to fire odd questions at her. At the last she wins through the old man's tyranny to her lover, Logan Treer, who is a conscientious objector in the war, and who is about to take over the farm when the book closes.

As an example of what I mean by Miss Roberts' slantwise and somewhat too subtle suggestiveness, let me cite just one example — the strange family has just been discussing the war:

"Jocelle did not speak to them then, loving all of them in quiet. Logan and Walter had taken off their leather jackets and they trailed them under an arm. Logan's leather vest was pulled open. He would shake his head now, his hat off, tossing back long imaginary locks. He seems to be riding a cantering animal, making laughter with Martha. Out of his centaur mouth gracious words were flowing. He was riding unshod, on swift horse limbs, little feet, thin shanks, strong thighs, his hair thrown up in a wind. He was standing, feet drawn together, Chiron, the good centaur, chanting a line, outstanding before Martha who was slowly dying, a lovely girl, the sun bright now on her dark hair and his rippling mouth:

'Give me a spark of Nature's fire,  
That's all the learning I desire;  
And tho' I drudge thro' dub and mire  
At plough . . . plough . . . plow. . . .'

'What's dub?'

'Dub's Scotch. Scotch for water hole. Drudge through a Kentucky water-hole, by George!'

'What George?'

'The Father of the Country, by Hec!'

'What Hec?'

Miss Roberts has the right, of course, to create a world of her own and to people it with her own creatures; the trouble here is that she has written about the everyday world in such a way as to cause more confusion and puzzlement than pleasure.

HERSCHEL BRICKELL

*HEAVEN'S MY DESTINATION.* By Thornton Wilder. Harper's, \$2.50.

"George Brush is my name,  
America's my nation  
Ludington's my dwelling place  
And Heaven's my destination."

THUS goes the doggerel about the hero who was dubbed by glowing advance critics as the Don Quixote of this tale. But a second quotation from one of Mr. Wilder's other books furnishes the key to his evangelical character: "Of all forms of genius, goodness has the longest awkward age." The reader must judge for himself the degree of satirical interest in this study. Many of the moralistic ideas personified in Brush can be traced to the Oxford movement, but Brush, unlike Buchman, thoroughly dislikes organized religion.

Readers of Mr. Wilder's work can never forget him. They may not be in tune with his classical philosophy but they will be hard put to gainsay the grave beauty of his style. His comic interpretation of human beings in universal situations, his concern with man's destiny, provoke endless discussion. Like the ancient Greeks whom he so obviously admires, Thornton Wilder cultivates art without loss of manliness. He is a "lover of the beautiful and simple in his tastes," as is shown in "The Woman of Andros," and "The Bridge of San Luis Rey."

In "Heaven's My Destination," the author returns to the manner of his earlier novel, "The Cabala." He is aiming the shaft of his insight, not this time at a decadent group of Romans with a precious culture, but at goodness in raw undigested proportions, as exemplified in the person of a lanky midwestern American. Yet the book is satire which does not quite come off. The writer's heart is not really in it. Since he has penned more of a fantasy than satire, this portrait of a zealot does not add to Mr. Wilder's stature as an artist. It adds immeasurably, however, to his reputation as a profound humorist and ironist.

George Brush is a human, enigmatic and funny, yet peculiarly unlovable figure, who wishes desperately to be taken seriously. Spicy and often raucous dialogue punctuates the peregrinations of this