

to imagine that off-Broadway activities could continue to grow and that the number of productions could multiply endlessly, there is already evidence of saturation. While new audiences are certainly being drawn into the off-Broadway theaters, lured there by the animated talk of new and exciting productions, the theaters are beginning to force much of their old audience away by the growing steepness of their prices. Where once one could see any off-Broadway show for a dollar or a dollar and a half and sit anywhere in the house at that price, a one-eighty or two-dollar minimum is no longer unusual. The Saturday top for *The Threepenny Opera* is now \$4.85; for *The Iceman Cometh*, \$4.50; for *The Purple Dust*, \$3.85. Although a playgoer might be willing to pay such prices for these three plays, he is likely to think twice before risking three dollars on an uncomfortable theater to see a play that has not been given the Atkinson seal of approval. Where once he might have risked a doubtful play, he is now likely to be drawn to a cheaper and more luxurious neighborhood movie.

In any event, if the audiences continue to pay the new prices, they are going to be less likely to allow the theaters to coast on quaintness; they are going to demand the kind of comfort that is evident in the new theaters like the Renata, and the costs are going to rise and undoubtedly the prices of tickets will go even higher. The Broadway cliché that there is no such thing as a moderately successful play is now and increasingly will become an off-Broadway bromide as well.

MOST off-Broadway observers look at the proliferating theatrical activity with the same suspicion that John Kenneth Galbraith watches the rising cost of living. They suspect that the balloon will have to burst one day. When and if it does, the old experimental quality may come back into off-Broadway activity, but, one hopes, not the old amateurishness. In the meantime, however, the discriminating playgoer can find good, well-acted plays, some of them in pleasant theaters, and can leave the others to their unhappy backers.

'Where Did She Not Pry, This Great Bee?'

HORTENSE CALISHER

CLOSE TO COLETTE—AN INTIMATE PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN OF GENIUS, by Maurice Goudekot. Farrar, Straus and Cudahy. \$4.00.

When Sidonie Gabrielle Claudine Colette Gauthier-Villars de Jouvenel, known to all the world as Colette, died in 1954 at the age of eighty-one at the end of a life extraordinarily inseparable from her work, she had long since received from her own country that national esteem with which France rewards its writers. True, although she was the first woman member of the Aca-



démie Goncourt, she had never been a member of the Académie Française. So much the worse for them, rather than for her, to whom even the chary Gide had forced himself to write: "I myself am completely astonished that I should be writing to you, astonished at the great pleasure I have had in reading you," and to whom the more generous Proust had already written, in 1919, "Your style and your color are so full of perpetual finds that if one noted everything one could write you a letter as long as your book."

In her long progression she was to have a life as multiple as one of the cat race she loved—Burgundian schoolgirl, provincial child-wife in Paris, hack writer, music-hall performer and dancer in the nude, actress as one of her own characters, theater critic, seller of beauty products, housewife as perfectionist in domestic lore as she was over a sentence, and writer—perhaps the first great French woman writer to come from the middle class.

That life was always to be of a piece with her work, from the time when her first husband, "the atrocious Willy," as Harold Nicolson and almost everybody else has called him, rediscovered the notebooks in which she had set down her schoolgirl memories of the village of Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye, and locked her in her room with instructions to hot them up a bit for publication—until that time when the sight of her, eighty, arthritic, and in a wheel chair, caused the people in the hotel salon at Monte Carlo to rise spontaneously and bow, drawing from her the astonished remark "Oh, d'ya see, Maurice? They remember me from last year." In the end, says Maurice Goudekot, her husband and, as she always emphasized, her *meilleur ami*, for thirty years, "She would have had the Nobel Prize if she had been able to wait for it." Instead of that she has this book, an exquisitely happy and grave revelation of a woman, a marriage, a life, and a writer—all unique.

WHEN their relationship began in 1925, Colette, at fifty-two, already had more than twenty books behind her, spanning between the turn-of-the-century notoriety she had received from the *Claudine* books and the more dignified *réclame* she had begun to receive after *Chéri* in 1920. In this country her real reputation began with Janet Flanner's translation of *Chéri* in 1929. It continued in a trickle of translations until after the war, when it received enormous, somewhat diffuse impetus from the personality cult of the fashion magazines, and later from the dramatizations of *Gigi*, whose star, an unknown named Audrey Hepburn, had been chosen by the sharp eye of the author herself, then seventy-eight.

Of the *Oeuvres Complètes*, published by Flammarion in 1950, only a small portion of the fifteen vol-

umes, comprising more than fifty titles, are available here in English, although more are promised. And here, too, she has never been given the critical attention awarded either her contemporaries or the younger generation of French writers. Her world, no more feminine than Virginia Woolf's, was less bluestocking, her style too sure to be classed as experimental. And her supposed sensationalism, garbed as it was in the décor of the demimonde, seemed to many too frivolous for dignified consideration. One might say of her that her art was almost too accessible for criticism, at least for some American critics.

Sido's Garden

Actually she was her own best commentator, continuously reassessing her life and work, stalking its persistent themes from another angle. She said of her mother, Sido: "She has made herself better known to me as I have grown older," and she herself remained a countrywoman for all her years in Paris, still speaking in the "bronze" voice, with its Burgundian "r," that all who met her remarked. Goudekot describes her revisiting Saint-Sauveur in memory, with her brother Léo. "That garden of Sido's to which Colette returned little by little, Léo had never left. He knew the faintest of its scents and still heard the creaking of its gates. . . . Without any introduction . . . he would begin to talk of 'down there.' Colette would enter into the game and it was wonderful to hear them competing by memory, first one and then the other . . . walking about in their childhood with steps that never hesitated." After reading Goudekot's account, one understands better Colette's extraordinary gift for the particularities of sensuous detail—a gift that was based in nature perhaps, but was to be equally sharp when turned on the tailor-made world.

"Her way of making contacts with things was through all her senses. . . . When she went into a garden she did not know, I would say to her: 'I suppose you are going to eat it, as usual' . . . she separated the petals of flowers, examined them, smelled them for a long time, crumpled the leaves, chewed them, licked the poisonous berries and the deadly

mushrooms, pondering intensely over everything she had smelt and tasted. Insects received almost the same treatment. . . . She absolutely had to know the name of anything she was contemplating . . . not so much to store it in her memory but



because the name completed the identity of the thing in question . . . she has sometimes been reproached for using difficult words, especially for flowers, plants and sea-creatures. The point is that for her they were not difficult words. . . . But above all she used the exact names of objects in daily use. . . . She knew a recipe for everything . . . furniture polish, vinegar, orangewine, quince-water, for cooking truffles or preserving linen . . . this country wisdom impregnates all her work. . . . Looked at in one light it would not have displeased her if one talked of recipes for writing."

THIS HOUSEHOLD IMAGERY is to appear everywhere in her work, bringing a curious solidity to her demimondaine worlds, and used in contexts light or powerful, from the casual, conversational aside when she could call Bach "a sublime sewing machine" down to the details of Léa's ménage in *Chéri*, where, in the language of cuisine and nursery comfort, the relationship is described without a psychological word, and no symbol of anguish is more apt than Léa's turning out her cupboards after *Chéri* is gone.

Dr. Johnson's Dog

Which brings us, brooding on the particular, to the question that often rears its silly suffragette head in critiques on women writers, and not infrequently in the hearts of the women themselves: Are female writ-

ers more limited in their world than male? Should they ignore all the special data they have as women or use it, try to be men or stand upon what they are—and in so doing any one of these things do they consign themselves to narrower than male limits and to less chance of greatness?

The answer, I think, comes better from Colette than from any other woman writer I know, and is to me a token of her stature. She is no more essentially feminine as a writer than any man is essentially masculine as a writer—certain notable attempts at the latter notwithstanding. She uses the psychological and concrete dossiers in her possession as a woman, not only without embarrassment but with the most natural sense of its value, and without any confusion as to whether the sexual balance of her sensitivity need affect the virility of her expression when she wants virility there.

Reading her, one is reminded that art—whether managed as a small report on a wide canvas, or vice versa—is a narrow thing in more senses than one, and that the woman writer, like any other, does best to accept her part in the human condition, and go on from there.

'There Is Only One Creature'

But let us return to Goudekot, who, while modestly disclaiming critical authority, scatters understanding everywhere in this quiet, graceful book. "It is not enough to say that she loved animals. Before every manifestation of life, animal or vegetable, she felt a respect which resembled religious fervor. At the same time she was always aware of the unity of creation in the infinite diversity of its forms. One evening she gave me a striking example of this. We were at the cinema, watching one of those shorts which show germinations accomplished in a moment, unfolding of petals which look like a struggle, a dramatic dehiscence. Colette was beside herself. Gripping my arm, her voice hoarse and her lips trembling, she kept on saying with the intensity of a pythoness: 'There is only one creature! D'you hear, Maurice, there is only one creature.'"

It is no wonder that she was able to treat every variation, singular or regular, of the sexual or half-sexual

relationship, with never the slightest false touch of lubricity, for, seeing every creature as an aspect of one, she could never really regard the sexes as antithetical.

AND THIS in turn was only part of a larger attitude that never made too much of the distinction between the animate and the inanimate, that was at any moment, witty or profound, likely to describe one in terms of the other, to say, on one page of *La Seconde*, "The place breathed the melancholy of waterless land," and on another, describing the actors seeking parts in Farou's new production—"duennas like thunder; a very pretty young man who went away swollen with tears, like a rose after rain."

It is an attitude that accounts for much; it is for instance one reason why she translates well, for whatever nuance or idiosyncrasy may be lost, there is almost always some basic image, native to us creatures, that does not escape. It accounts in part, also, for that earlier mentioned "accessibility" which perhaps so depresses the interest of the modern critics, particularly those more interested in displaying themselves. There is nothing much to emend in Colette. She treats of the basic mysteries, but with the utmost care not to add any mystification of her own, like a midwife too busy getting the baby born to stop for the philosophical "Why?" It is hard lines explicating a writer who by instinct anticipates you in getting things clear.

As for her "daring," it is there, but is not of a sort to compel, for instance, those who love to brood on the eunuchoid element in James or to extrapolate a national homosexual dream from Huck Finn. It is the daring of an eye that looks on the world with the directness of total health—an eye somewhat chilling at times, possibly because, like those of the genus *Bufo* or *Rano* on whom she often drew for imagery, it occupies so very much of the head. One finds here perhaps the reason for the accusation that she did not create individual character, that she saw people to be as inchoate as those other fauna or flora through whom life blooms, droops, and is cut down, and that she never moved from her

microcosm either to the metaphysical or to the "world at large." Certainly it would be just to say that she never seemed to have much time to consider things as they might be, so busy was she with the morality of things as they were. One might best accuse her, as Aglaia did Myshkin, of a judgment that suffered from seeing nothing but the truth.

Her Gaiety, Her Austerity

Colette read extensively, "botany, natural history, life in the ocean depths, birds and butterflies. . . . And, travel, ah! travels. The sixty-eight volumes of the *Tour du Monde*. . . . Livingston, Stanley, Huc, Landon, Arago, Comte de Beauvoir, Schweinfurth, Madame Ida Pfeifer." She refused to do a literary column "in order not to spoil her pleasure as a reader. . . . No interviewer could succeed in making her judge her contemporaries." Nevertheless, how brilliantly she could characterize! "The



appointment of Jean Giraudoux as Minister of Information puzzled her. 'Curious . . . there's a writer who most of the time proceeds by negation, defining things and people by what they are not: "He was neither this . . . nor that . . . nor the other"—and he's the man they choose to inform us!' " And the famous description of Proust: "He never stopped speaking with effort, and being gay. He kept his hat on his head—because of the cold, he excused himself—his top hat, tilted backward, and his hair spread out in a fanlike shape over his eyebrows. In fact, an everyday gala costume, but disarranged as though by a raging wind, which, throwing his hat to the back of his head, crumpling his shirt and the untidy ends of his cravat, filling the furrows of his cheeks, the orbits of his eyes and his breathless mouth with a black ash, seemed to pursue this tottering young man of fifty right unto his death."

In this book, the distillation of thirty years, there is more than one can begin to touch upon, and all presented with humility, subtle intelligence, and love. Her gaiety: On emerging from Roxy's and a Mae West picture in New York, they meet an alley cat. "At last," cries Colette, "someone who speaks French." M. Goudekot on their marriage: "A man does not love a woman for her genius; he loves her in spite of her genius . . . this essay could hardly be written as an ordinary biography. Nothing would happen in it. Happiness has no adventures . . . chance would have it that neither of us liked . . . those groundless scenes which are daily bread in many households. But every moment we lived together was a moment of fullness and joy." Her reply, when friends hear laughter coming from their sitting room and inquire of the joke: "Nothing at all! It was just that he was with me and I was with him."

And her austerity: "One must be careful not to fall in the direction in which one naturally leans." Her refusal of sedation for the pain of the last years: "I want to know just how far I can go." And her answer, to another French writer who suggested that Maurice, then held by the Gestapo, save himself by turning informer, death being the only alternative: "'Very well, then, I choose death.' . . . 'Not without consulting your husband, I imagine?' . . . 'We choose death,' amended Colette."

THIS is an enchanting memoir, more than a memoir. The translation, left uncredited by the publisher, is excellent. Finishing the book, one remembers what Colette said of George Sand in her own memoir, *L'Etoile Vesper*: "Powerfully she arranged, all in a muddle, her work, her curable sorrows and her limited felicities. I would never have known how to do so much, and when she was thinking of the full barn, I was lingering to look at the green flowers of the wheat. Mauriac, in his heartfelt praise, consoles me: 'Where did she not pry, this great bee?' " There is a likeness, if one excises the word "muddle," and remembers for how little Colette needed to be consoled.

The Very Last Hurrah

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

I'D DO IT AGAIN, by James Michael Curley. *Prentice-Hall. \$4.95.*

After he was re-elected to Congress in 1942, as he tells the story, James Michael Curley began to consider, not for the first time, how he might improve his position. He thought he might run for the Senate and it seemed like a good idea to go over to the Senate chamber and stage a public brawl with Senator Tom Heflin of Alabama, who had been making some uncomplimentary remarks about Catholics. ". . . the ensuing publicity would put me in solid with my supporters, who would understand that any blows I struck were in the interests of the faith." Unfortunately, Curley was stopped en route by some labor leaders. While he stood talking with them, an individual came up and gave him a friendly clap on the back. It was Heflin. "I just couldn't hit the man," Curley said.

This story involves nearly all of the elements of the Curley legend as offered without encumbering modesty in these memoirs. The author is a showman. He is proud of his reputation for personal combativeness. He is willing to use religion for his own highly personal purposes. The events of which he tells did not necessarily occur. In this instance there is at least average doubt: Heflin had been retired from the Senate some eleven years before.

THese tendencies of the author, both as a politician and as a historian, should be kept in mind, because of late the rumor has been circulating that Curley, like Edwin O'Connor's Skeffington in *The Last Hurrah*, whom he is thought by some to resemble, is a great and lovable statesman. Though naturally a trifle flamboyant for some tastes, he is and always has been a true friend of the underprivileged and the poor. Curley himself has conceded that there is much to this point of view, and the present book is partly calculated to lend credence to this thought. This is only partly its pur-

pose, for, not uncharacteristically, the author's motives are complex. He obviously wants the book to sell, and this has led him to record quite a few adventures, real and hypothetical, that rather detract from the nobility of the image.

Certainly Curley was no ordinary political boss. He was clever and articulate, and had both an audacious sense of humor and a highly developed if somewhat indiscriminate imagination. These qualities distinguish him from such barren personalities as Frank Hague and Ed Crump. Moreover, he couldn't really be called a machine politician, because he never had an organization on which he could rely absolutely for election. (One reason is that a leader must also be loyal to his organization, and where his own interests were involved Curley was never a man of divided loyalties.)



But though Curley had all these qualities, he was not a great or even a responsible figure in municipal and state administration, and his self-confessed goodness of soul is worth a second thought. Thus the largess in the form of ten-dollar bills which he distributed to his needy retainers was not, as he seems to think, a very satisfactory form of social security. Apart from some appreciation of the importance of public works, one will search the book in vain for any suggestion of interest in the problems of city administra-

tion. Honest government does not, as he regularly implies, have to be reactionary.

In the late 1920's, Curley proudly tells us, he invented a Ku Klux Klan scare, and even (he claims) burned some crosses in Massachusetts to stir his fellow Catholics to their political duty. This isn't much of an improvement over being a Klansman in the first place. Again he tells with equal pride how he attacked Thomas H. Eliot, against whom he ran for Congress in 1942, as a Unitarian, as a friend of the CIO, and (an outrageous charge) as a supporter of Communism. Those who wish to applaud this gay, colorful, and exuberant figure should ponder the implications of such political behavior. There are, for example, rules that men of different religious faiths have learned they must observe if they are to live amicably together. Violating those rules is not altogether a laughing matter.

OF COURSE it has long been known that there is a profound sociological justification for Jim Curley. His ancestors were poor Irish immigrants. When they arrived they were thoroughly snubbed by the Cabots and the Lowells. They retaliated by going into politics and taking possession of the government of both Boston and the Commonwealth. No one accepts this interpretation more completely than Jim Curley. Anyone who doesn't applaud him is likely to be dismissed as a lackey of the old aristocracy.

In case anyone should be inclined to go along with that proposition, let me take the precaution of saying that I belong to an even later migrant wave than Curley's—by the time mine arrived he was handsomely established on the Jamaica way. Nor was there, as I recall, any special welcome from the ancient families. Accordingly, I can claim to view both the earlier and later dynasties with some detachment. It is certainly true, as Curley insists, that the respectable Republicans of Massachusetts have regularly manifested their respectability by a maximum of decorous inaction. But it doesn't follow that the only alternative to a Coolidge is a Curley. It wasn't true then and it certainly isn't true now.