

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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The Return of Harlequin

SOME years ago when what we elect to call "realism" was digging its deepest and energetically dredging to light every uncomfortable manifestation of ordinary life, when our most promising young artists wore double spectacles lest anything nauseous escape them, we wistfully suggested a return to fantasy as an amelioration of the somewhat gruesomely sincere. In America, at that time, James Branch Cabell seemed almost the sole practitioner of fantasy, our only (quite outmoded) romantic. Utterly disregarded for years he had found himself distressedly in the spotlight, not at first as an acclaimed adroit draftsman of a rare art, but as the author of a book suppressed by the authorities.

Together with our mild suggestion as to fantasy went a milder prophecy that the pendulum oscillating between grim realism and what Stevenson called mere "tushery" was bound to swing returning, that being the natural law of pendulums. Therefore today we are not surprised to observe that fantasy seems really to be having its hour. But we did not prophesy that it was the poets who would restore us harlequin, though it is they, we hold, who have been largely instrumental in hastening the change that has come over the spirit of our dream.

One thinks at once of Walter De La Mare, though "Henry Brocken" (for instance) is an older book than readers of the latest editions may realize. In a newer generation one cites Aldous Huxley, who started as a brilliantly original poet and has forged a prose style that can both etch with acid and juggle deftly with fantastic ideas. One acknowledges Carl Van Vechten's several fantasies, as those of a poet *manqué*, Christopher Morley's "Where the Blue Begins," Elinor Wylie's "Jennifer Lorn" and "The Venetian Glass Nephew." These last in America,—but to return to England, one at least of the famous poetic Sitwells has, this year, (turning from the voluminous production of acrobatic verse) produced in "Triple Fugue" brilliant stories that blend a most ebullient gaiety with tragic drama. He whips up what appears to be a literary confection that yet conceals a core of solid nourishment. Such men as he and Huxley cause words to coruscate and outrageous or merely hilarious asides to abound. But so long as this is a removal from the old dark suet pudding of Sex and Circumstance, God be thanked! It is not, in Huxley, a far removal, perhaps, but there is more sinew and pith in the argument.

Then, too, the most popular English novelist (in America) at the moment, though, to be sure, he cannot be claimed as a Heliconian, is Michael Arlen, who, at least, achieves often a perfect frenzy of fantasy (some of it, perhaps, unconscious) in his tricky tales. And, to revert once more to America, that true lyric poet, Robert Nathan, has now established his reputation as a prose fantasist of unusual gifts. And, if we have Evelyn Scott (fundamentally a poet) still dealing in sombre neuroses in her novels, and Herbert S. Gorman (an indubitable poet) pitching his first novel in the key of Joyce, we have also this season the prose fantasy of the younger poet, Donald Douglas, have witnessed Maxwell Bodenheim's voyages for several years in the metaphysical balloon of his fantastic prose, and note Conrad Aiken's new excursions into other realms than verse.

Anyone who has perused Eddison's "The Worm Ouroboros" in England, or chanced upon the new "Mr. Godly Beside Himself" by Gerald Bullett

The Snare

By EDWARD DAVISON

FAR away and long ago
This trouble at my heart began:
Ere Eden perished like a flower,
Or Eve had shed her tears an hour,
Or Adam knew himself a man,
In every leaf of every tree
Beauty had set a snare for me.

Far away and long ago
Her loveliest song began to chime.
Bright Hector fell, and at the stroke
Ten thousand hearts like mine awoke
In every age and every clime.
She stood bestriding Time and Space
Amid the stars, and lit the rose
With scent and color, and she chose
My country for a dwelling place,
And set a snare in every tree
Awaiting me, awaiting me!

This Week

AN ENGAGING FANTASIA.

By *Edward Lucas White.*IRREDUCIBLE GUSTO. By *Floyd Dell.*MASS-HISTORY. By *Wilbur Cortez Abbott.*

Next Week

SPRING BOOK NUMBER

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(also an English writer) perceives other straws that indicate the breeze. Dunsany, a poet, has of course for years shaken fantasy after fantasy out of a seemingly inexhaustible cornucopia; and James Stephens, a poet, has also produced them. But these are Irishmen, and in Ireland fairies are expected.

Sabatini, in his late "arrival," after years of novel-writing, has influenced—aside from pure fantasy—a return to "cloak and sword." The recent Charles Boardman Hawes competition has increased the output of costume romance. And to look for other indications of that return swing of the pendulum of which we spoke, we find one even in Sinclair Lewis's "Babbitt," where the mere truth was discovered as stranger than any dream and the preposterous described upon our own doorstep, bearing out the late Aubrey Beardsley's remark that "All the monsters are not in Africa."

Yes, we can count a considerable scattering of bright birds risen from the bog of psychoanalysis, that now wing the heaven of creative literature. They bear romance as healing upon their wings. Some of the more poetic are fire-crowned with fantasy. The return of etymological legerdemain, of pleasing extravagance of style, of the exercise of the unreined imagination as opposed to the labor-

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Literary Independence

By FRANCES NEWMAN

Author of "The Short Story's Mutations"

THREE or four weeks ago, when a far-darting Melbourne bookseller sent his list to my library, I read through its dozen pages without the satisfaction of meeting a familiar name—which was not very astonishing, since the only literary Australian names I know are Robert Boldrewood and Mrs. Campbell Praed and the belligerent poet called Skeyhill, and since those names are perhaps not an Australian bookseller's pride. But, among all the names which apparently are his pride, not even the discourse on the relative virtues of Socrates and Saint Paul seemed likely to reveal any very good reason why England and Europe and America have allowed Australia to possess its Skeyhills in peace and to lack its Merediths in peace. So—naturally enough, when my eyes fell on a history of Canadian literature a few days later, I read through all of its index and some of its pages to discover the literary justification of the dominion which, in its social aspect at least, England sees with less assistance from its Iorgnon. Only the name of Bliss Carman rose to meet my eyes, but the doctor of philosophy who submitted this dissertation in partial fulfilment of the requirements for his degree had set the Confederation as his farther boundary, and Professor Leacock and Robert Service were doubtless absent because they were born too late, not because of any intellectual inferiority to Mr. Carman, or to the Richardson who is the father of whatever fictions Canada may have produced, or to the unfortunate poet whose name I forget rather than increase the mortification of a man who may have lived, so far as I know, to read that in a small way he was to Canada what Longfellow was to the United States.

Since the doctor's dissertation did not reveal any more reasons than the bookseller's list, why the dominions beyond the seas were allowed to possess their Services in peace and to lack their Merediths in peace, even when Kipling's star had set on India and Katherine Mansfield's star had not yet risen over New Zealand, and since family pride will not explain the critical reticence of a land which, unofficially, has always seemed to regard its colonies as cousins from the country rather than as offspring, the only reasonable explanation would seem to be that loyal colonies require playwrights and novelists even less than they require ambassadors and battle-ships, and that when rebellious colonies insistently assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, they incur an obligation to provide themselves with poets and playwrights and philosophers, as well as with judges and senators and presidents.

Evidently we cannot avoid the obligation by demonstrating that a talent for government and a talent for the arts have never been the indivisible national characteristics a talent for cookery and a talent for millinery still are. The rulers and the writers we have provided for ourselves showed an unmistakable likeness in the day of Washington and Franklin and in the day of Lincoln and Whitman, and they still show that likeness in the day of Coolidge and Sinclair Lewis. Patriotism will not allow the supposition that we might have learned to govern ourselves better if we had not run away to seek our fortune, and even if the literature of Canada and the literature of Australia did not forbid the supposition that we might have learned more

about writing as colonies than as states, any history of English fiction offers excellent evidence that we dissolved the political bonds which had connected us with England just in time to escape the degeneration of its prose. From the year eighteen hundred and eighteen, when "Persuasion" was published, to the year eighteen hundred and fifty-seven, when "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" was published, no writer of English fiction seems to have believed that every word in a novel must justify its right to be written down, and that the justification must be a charm of its own, quite apart from its mere meaning. Even after Meredith suggested that idea, some thirty years passed drearily by before his literary compatriots crossed the Channel and discovered that Balzac had been dead long enough for France to realize again that a fiction has not a history's right to be cherished as tenderly as a portrait of Henry the Fourth is cherished, entirely without regard to its æsthetic virtues, and that it must justify every line as the lines of the "Primavera" justify Botticelli for proceeding without sittings from Venus and Flora and Mercury and the Graces.

* * *

None of Meredith's eminent contemporaries, certainly, wrote as badly as our Cooper, whose prose is so distressingly anacoluthic that even Poe was aware of what he called the grammatical inaccuracies of "Wyandotté," and almost aware that grammatical inaccuracies do not necessarily spoil a charming style and that grammatical accuracy is far from creating one. But an unfortunately large number of Cooper's less critical contemporaries seem to have been as undisturbed by his incoherences as William Dean Howells's less critical contemporaries were by his lapses from Henry James's standard of sophistication, and almost as undisturbed as Carl Van Vechten's less critical contemporaries are by his lapses from his own standard of sophistication. The extremely gradual rise of our taste and our knowledge during the century that has elapsed between "The Spy" and "The Tattooed Countess" leaves little reason for hoping that "Jennifer Lorn" and "Jurgin" will influence our prose any more rapidly than "The Egoist" and "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" influenced the prose which, whether we like it or not, will be our standard of perfection until we set up a standard of our own and the American language finds a stronger solvent for the etymological bonds which connect it with England than a fancy for saying elevator rather than lift and shoe rather than boot.

Cooper was probably unaware that a prose fiction provides its author with none of the formal shelters which protect a poet and a playwright from the revealing light of day. He probably did not reflect that a poet may put his grammatical inaccuracies down to the necessity of being continuously iambic, and that a playwright may put his grammatical inaccuracies down to the necessity of revealing his characters' intellectual frailties. If Cooper had written plays instead of fiction, "He was advancing by the only road that was ever traveled by the stranger as he approached the hut; or, he came up the valley," might have been the carefully composed utterance of a pioneer instead of the accidental utterance of an inadequately equipped novelist. If Howells had written solemn plays instead of farces and solemn fiction, "He had not built, but had bought very cheap of a terrified gentleman of good extraction," would have been the inelegance of Silas Lapham instead of the inelegance of Howells himself. And if Laurence Stallings had made "Plumes" another play, "Penelope was hurrying through a summer teacher's course in piano," and "Richard had not fleshed to the beam commensurate with his six feet of Plume," would have been only two quotable examples of speech among those citizens of Georgia who give their children such magnificent names as Richard Coeur de Lion Plume. When Eugene O'Neill composed the conversation between Mildred Douglas and her unfortunate aunt in the second scene of "The Hairy Ape," he did indeed suggest the terrible thing a portrait of a lady would become in one of his novels—even in England, I believe, affluence of the third generation is expected to produce a lady. But Theodore Dreiser himself does not often succeed in adding inelegancies to the inelegancies of the characters in his plays, and in the excellent comedy Carl Van Vechten might make from "The Tattooed Countess," "he had sensed the fact that she was in love with him" and "when she married" and "dress suit"

and "had been loaned" and "dresser" would pass from the narrative into a vocabulary admirably suited to people who were in the deplorable habit of cutting asparagus into small pieces and boiling the small pieces in cream. In the same excellent comedy, Mrs. Johns might have reminded her son that she "could not presume to open her house suddenly to this visiting guest," and her adoption of a phrase that is not often heard except in a newspaper's mention of a concert for charity in the drawing room or the ballroom of some great lady would have been even more admirably suited to a mother who was not an intimate friend of the countess's sister. And if Willa Cather had written "A Lost Lady" in a prologue, three acts, and an epilogue, "Niel was proud like his mother; she died when he was five years old," would have been an example of our inconsequential speech instead of a sentence which does not triumph over Cooper even by its semicolon.

But Miss Cather has never seemed to assume that sophistication is the chief literary virtue, and her sentences are at least true to her own values. Apparently she does not wish to write well, and apparently she does not wish to avoid a figure so worn as "this war was undreamed of, hidden in the womb of time," or to compare her lost lady with anything more original than steel of Damascus. And when Sherwood Anderson says that John Webster "got out the little picture of the Virgin and set it up on a kind of dresser that stood in a corner," he is true to his own values, and to John Webster's values, and to the somewhat distracted values of "Many Marriages." Mr. Van Vechten would have been perfectly entitled to write "dresser" and "dress suit" and "loaned" in the narrative that connects the conversations of Miss Poore and Mrs. Townsend and Gareth Johns and of a countess whose first thirty years seem to have been lived in Maple Valley. And he would have been entitled to connect their homely speech with what is, I suppose, his own evolved vocabulary appearing for the first time without the peroxide of George Moore or the henna of Ronald Firbank. But when he writes "dresser" and "dress suit" and "loaned" in the same narrative with "morigeration" and "sciapodous," he is wearing etymological overalls with an etymological top hat. And he is joining with Sinclair Lewis and Floyd Dell, and some other only less celebrated novelists, to prove that when the Society of Jesus insists on the impossibility of erasing childish impressions, it is as wise as its enemies fear, and that Maple Valley and Gopher Prairie and Port Royal must be very like the towns from which their chroniclers escaped to each other's society.

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There is a curious example of these enduring impressions in "The Tattooed Countess" when Mr. Van Vechten assumes with his former fellow citizens that the nude figure in Titian's "Sacred and Profane Love" is Profanity—a mistake so different from Aldous Huxley's assumption that Michelangelo's monument to a Lorenzo de Medici is necessarily a monument to Lorenzo the Magnificent that even the author of "Main Street" should have been able to see a different distinction between their essays in sophistication. Nevertheless, people who hope to see American fiction well written cannot fail to cherish Mr. Van Vechten's books for their realization that such a quality as style exists, and for the examples of his conviction which have brought a realization of style to countless thousands of our undergraduates. And the same people must be grateful to Thomas Beer for writing "Sandoval," and for writing it without succumbing to "the fact that," even if they feel that the best prose for a novel is not necessarily a prose which manages to put at least one figure of speech into every subject and into every predicate, into every protasis and into every apodosis. "Sandoval" was apparently thought phrase by phrase in one language and then translated phrase by phrase into a language as different as Turkish presumably is from English. No one, of course, can be sure of the working even of his own mind, but in the first paragraph, Mr. Beer may be supposed to have thought "the forest swallowed up the funeral," and then to have translated his thought into "the forest ate the funeral." And a good deal farther along, he may be supposed to have thought "a ring sparkled on his left hand," and then to have translated his thought into "a ring blinked on his left hand."

If there were not such eminent critical evidence that I am wrong, I should still think that a com-

parison of one page from "Sandoval" with one page from "Women in Love" would convince any rational person that a man who wishes to write in images must think in images, and that thinking up a fresh idea is the only entirely successful way of achieving a fresh phrase. I do still think that almost any rational person must realize that these men and women who have a passion for good prose which they cannot realize in their own writing are our slightly belated American equivalent of the Englishmen of the eighteen nineties and of the Frenchmen of the eighteen eighties—and not merely because some of them have the same touching conviction that the departed waters of the Ilissus have flowed into the Seine, and that the portrayal of perfect immorality will lead to perfect sophistication and perfect prose. Probably no one over twenty-five years old would still maintain that Oscar Wilde wrote good prose, but I cannot remember seeing a suggestion that the men of the eighteen nineties achieved good phrases oftener than they achieved good sentences because they came to literary consciousness when the novels of Thackeray and Dickens and George Eliot were the literature England read and respected. And neither do I remember seeing a suggestion that the men and women of the American nineteen twenties are suffering from the prose of Howells and Mark Twain and Winston Churchill, which was the literature America read and respected when they came to literary consciousness. James Branch Cabell and Elinor Wylie are the same sports in the America of Willa Cather and Theodore Dreiser that George Meredith and Henry James were in the England of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, and not one of those four admirable writers can have fed his infant consciousness on the literature of his own country.

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And neither do I remember seeing a suggestion—though Mr. Mencken has doubtless made it—that the improvement in American prose marches side by side with the victory of American doubts over American convictions. The men of the English eighteen nineties were solemn young men, for all their wit and all their wickedness, and our young men are solemn too. But there are Mr. Cabell and Mrs. Wylie, and there is Robert Nathan, and there are some others who are less eminent for various extenuating reasons, and probably none of them would go to the stake for any of the ideas they would not be likely to call their convictions. But our dawning doubts have not changed the most distinctive quality of American prose—the inability or the unwillingness of American writers to write simply when they write well. No prose written in English has ever been quite as simple as the prose written in French, or the prose written in Italian before Gabriele d'Annunzio discovered the pomegranate, but there are Englishmen who can write for the voice or at least for the double-stopped violin, and all Americans who write well write for the orchestra. None of us is willing to write a sentence without ideas that are vertical nearly as often as they are horizontal, and a great many of us are fond of language lofty enough for a major prophet, and a great many of us write nearly as many commas as we do words. Not many of us can write a story or a novel without showing a conviction that excellence of technique is something very like literary acrobatics, and probably we shall never learn the virtues of a form that does not project beyond the edges of its theme, even with the example of Sherwood Anderson's struggles for simplicity, so long as "Ethan Frome" is considered a truly extraordinary technical achievement. Its admirers, of course, have the excuse that a disagreeable story about New England villagers or Wessex dairymaids must always be superior to a somewhat less disagreeable story about the descendants of colonial governors, or about the descendants of crusaders. But "Ethan Frome" seems to have left most of our reviewers without any knees in their criticism because Mrs. Wharton began her story with the revelation of Ethan Frome's unhappy state and ended it with the revelation of the unhappy events which brought him to that state—a feat, I should have supposed, that a less experienced writer than Mrs. Wharton might have undertaken without a net under her.

But even a realization that the form and the style of a novel cannot be impressed on it as irrelevantly as new forms have been impressed on the waffle, and even doubts high as the heavens, will not be enough

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