

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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### Out of New England

WHAT Poe used to call "the literati" have gathered twice this month to praise the enduring vigor of literary New England. Robert Frost's fiftieth birthday was celebrated in New York with fitting tribute, and the completion of Amy Lowell's "Life of John Keats" was the theme of a dinner in Boston where four hundred testified that poetry was still read and those who serve the Muse applauded.

The great tradition of New England literature is not dead, although for half a century it was possessed by writers more amiable than great. Miss Lowell has the fruitful cerebration of the Concord philosophers and the tart strength in poetry of Emerson or Emily Dickinson. She has the urbanity and scholarship of old Boston and that confidence in the worth of her ideas without which literature remains colonial or inept. Her poetry is no more experimental than were the essays of Emerson, and like his essays it sets brains to working and stirs the imagination. Putting mind and skill into the sappy American poetry of the early nineteen hundreds, she perhaps more than any other was responsible for the new interest in poetry which sparkled like electricity from youth to youth. Civilized, like her relative James Russell Lowell, beyond the American norm, she has also that gift for radical originality which was once native in New England. It is *her* New England, as she says in "Lilacs," and in these aspects she is more truly New England than most of us in our books succeed in being American.

If Miss Lowell reminds one of those dominant intellectuals who in the seventeenth century seized the New England hills, and made them their own, Robert Frost is like a pine come up from the soil itself and rich with a concentrate of its harsh, sweet flavors. Frost has the shrewdness raised to philosophy which, as in Thoreau, becomes insight; and in his own verse the shrewdness raised to poetry which transforms a homely subject into a picture of the eternal. The dry New England humor, scornful of weak ideas but tolerant otherwise, is his also, and the new England equalitarianism—the model for America—in which personality develops without reference to means or occupation, poor creatures have fierce characters, and tragedies enact in two-room cottages as intensely as in palaces. Frost's poetry is like Emerson's, in that its simplicity and occasional ruggedness are close to the appearance of the subject, which, as with the unkempt farmers who lean from their buggies in his poems and say in flat vowels and curt accents memorable things, is usually neither simple nor rugged in its inner meanings.

Frost has, and Frost practices, the restraint of old New England, which pinched the body to profit the soul even as he denies himself range so that the truth of his inexpressive people may be distilled into his verse. Beside Whitman he seems parsimonious, but Emerson, who hoarded sentences for years until he could use them fitly, would have understood him. In a lavish period, when words are cheap and the tide of smart writing rises to the housetops, he stands aside, skeptical as Thoreau was skeptical, and turns his back on the clatter of Broadway to watch a little drama with some meaning to it on a lovely hilltop in forgotten New Hampshire.

This is the New England tradition which at its best drew beauty from ruggedness, admired character, and despised mere quantity or bigness. It is a dangerous tradition for lesser writers who de-

### After Disaster

By LIZETTE WOODWORTH REESE.

WHO hurts his heel upon a stone,  
Knows that some trick of life is done;  
No longer his the rage to do,  
The rush across the hurrying sun.

Such thrift he shows with his new hours,  
That he spares one, to stoop his head  
To some grey book he read with her,  
Who loved him long since. She is dead.

Lovely, secure, unhastening things,  
Fast-kept for this, grip as of yore;—  
The drowsy traffic of the bees;  
The scarlet haws beyond a door.

### This Week

RELIGION FOR EVERYMAN.

By Benjamin W. Bacon.

A FIGHTING RECONCILER.

By Sidney Cox.

IN A HISTORIC SETTING.

By Aymar Embury II.

THE TRAGEDY OF GOOD INTENTIONS.

By Llewellyn Jones.

THE STOP OF BLOOD.

By Bernard de Voto.

THE BOWLING GREEN.

By Christopher Morley.

### Next Week, or Later

Van Wyck Brooks's "The Pilgrimage of Henry James." Reviewed by Thomas Beer.

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grade it into moralizing, and lesser men become anæmic, cranky, and querulous under its restraints. But Frost, like his spiritual ancestors, is nourished by a great heart within that keeps his spirit more fruitful than the poets of the crowd.

Perhaps there is something in the geographer's opinion which holds that the soil and air through generations mould the stock that inhabit them. Certainly New England had mightily changed the New Englanders of the forties from the pattern of their ancestors. And perhaps now that the period of migration and immigration has ended, New England will once more become highly individual. Miss Lowell and Mr. Frost may be forerunners. However that may be, they are assuredly torchbearers of a great tradition and from their books, if all the libraries were burned, we could reconstruct the mind and the imagination of New England.

### Thomas Love Peacock

By R. W. CHAPMAN

THE admission to Olympus of Thomas Love Peacock, pre-Victorian poet and novelist, is being celebrated by the issue of a monumental collected edition of his works. Four volumes have been published\*—judiciously edited, equipped with due bibliographical trappings, beautifully printed and bound—and six more are promised. Publication will be in at least three instalments, so that the incense will curl heavenwards many times and from many altars. We hope that its savor will be grateful to the very exacting epicure who now sits with his peers above the clouds.

There can, I think, be no question of the reality and permanence of Peacock's apotheosis. The recognition is no new thing; no one has just discovered him. Ever since Shelley praised him more than a century ago, he has had readers and admirers. Literary craftsmen and connoisseurs especially have always relished his peculiar dry wit, his profound scholarship, and his admirable style. Among men of letters he has been a kind of oracle. But by degrees his fame spread beyond these exclusive circles, and he became more widely known to discerning lovers of literature. The circumstances of recent times have concurred to swell the chorus of appreciation to a joyous clamor. In England today he has perhaps as many readers as any novelist of equal antiquity, except only Miss Austen and Sir Walter Scott.

This is a notable achievement; for Peacock has many handicaps. In the first place he is a satirist, and his first novel was published in 1816. Most of the institutions he pilloried, and nearly all the persons, are dead and forgotten. Worse still, he is both eccentric and monotonous. If he can be said to have a plot, certainly he has no more than one; and it is doubtful if he has more than one character who really lives. His warmest admirers would admit a difficulty in remarking whether a given episode is in "Headlong Hall" or "Crotchet Castle," or in distinguishing the wit and wisdom of the Reverend Dr. Opimian from the wit and wisdom of the Reverend Dr. Folliott. In the rest, they are playthings. The cranks are cranks, the spirited young men are spirited, and the pretty girls are pretty. But that is all that can be said of them with any confidence. The conversations too, which fill three-fourths of his pages, are very one-sided affairs. Nearly all the sense, wit, and learning—the rapier thrusts and the sledgehammer blows—are wielded by that reverend gentleman who shares his creator's innumerable prejudices; and many of the dialogues might not unfairly be called tilting at windmills. There are also minor irritations, which by accumulation may become serious. We cannot all be expected to share our author's interest in the fine shades of gastronomy, or his antipathy to paper money, or his enthusiasm for the "Dionysiaca" of the poet Nonnus. But we are never spared these topics of panegyric or invective; and Greek quotations lie everywhere athwart the path.

These obstacles are surmounted by their artistic merit. The obvious defects of Peacock's books—the work of an eccentric amateur—do not matter, because their merits are so great. He had all the essential gifts: a keen and powerful intellect, a warm and passionate nature, a vivid perception of beauty. By virtue of these qualities he was a good

\*The works of Thomas Love Peacock. Edited by H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones. Vols. II, III, IV, and V. New York: Gabriel Wells. 1925.



jester, a good lover, a good hater, and an artist.

All these elements of Peacock's genius may be found in his relation with the poet Shelley. Shelley admired him for his scholarship and his wit, and liked him for other reasons. His strong sense acted on Shelley like a tonic. It was Peacock who prescribed "three mutton chops, well peppered" in substitution for a diet of tea, bread and butter, and "a sort of spurious lemonade, made of some powder in a box." Shelley took the prescription, and its success was "obvious and immediate." He took Peacock's prescription for other ills than malnutrition; it would have been well for him if he could have taken them oftener. When Peacock made Scythrop—him of the doleful countenance—the hero of his "Nightmare Abbey," a glowing, passionate young man who began with schemes to reform the universe and ended on the brink of suicide because he could not marry two young women at once (and so neither would have him), Shelley was delighted by the joke, and provided the book with a motto out of Ben Jonson. It is doubtful if he would have taken so intimate a joke at any other hand. When he left England, his best letters were written to Peacock. Many years after his death, Peacock sent to *Fraser's Magazine* a long review of Hogg's "Life" and Trelawny's "Recollections." The importance of these "Memoirs of Shelley" is recognized. They throw, as we should expect, a dry light upon the obscure places of Shelley's life. But though the light is dry it is not cold.

To readers unacquainted with Peacock I would recommend that they should begin with the "Memoirs"; and I venture to tempt them with an extract, which is so characteristic that I do not apologize for its length.

... Shelley came in, with my hat in his hand. He said, "Mary tells me, you do not believe that I have had a visit from Williams." I said, "I told her there were some improbabilities in the narration." He said, "You know William of Tremadoc?" I said, "I do." He said, "It was he who was here to-day. He came to tell me of a plot laid by my father and uncle, to entrap me and lock me up. He was in great haste, and could not stop a minute, and I walked with him to Egham." I said, "What hat did you wear?" He said, "This, to be sure." I said, "I wish you would put it on." He put it on, and it went over his face. I said, "You could not have walked to Egham in that hat." He said, "I snatched it up hastily and perhaps I kept it in my hand. I certainly walked with William to Egham, and he told me what I have said. You are very sceptical." I said, "If you are certain of what you say, my scepticism cannot affect your certainty." He said, "It is very hard on a man who has devoted his life to the pursuit of truth, who has made great sacrifices and incurred great sufferings for it, to be treated as a visionary. If I do not know that I saw William, how do I know that I see you?" I said, "An idea may have the force of a sensation; but the oftener a sensation is repeated, the greater is the probability of its origin in reality. You saw me yesterday, and will see me to-morrow." He said, "I can see William to-morrow if I please. He told me he was stopping at the Turk's Head Coffee-house, in the Strand, and should be there two days. I want to convince you that I am not under a delusion. Will you walk with me to London to-morrow, to see him?" I said, "I would most willingly do so." The next morning after an early breakfast we set off on our walk to London. We had got half way down Egham Hill, when he suddenly turned round, and said to me, "I do not think we shall find William at the Turk's Head." I said, "Neither do I."

The simplest elements of Peacock's satire are to be seen in this story, in which a situation rich in absurdity is drawn with the faintest possible strokes, and is the more telling for this economy. A man without satirical humor might have judged it his duty to admit that Shelley sometimes imagined things; but he could not have had Peacock's pleasure in the incongruities of the scene—the inconvenient hat, the early and inglorious termination of the gallant journey. The mere perception of fraud in absurdity does not issue in satire, unless it is brightened by a gust of temper. A certain intolerance and impatience are necessary to satire; but its quality depends on the satirist's emotional state. The peculiar mild pungency of Peacock's satire is due to its freedom from real bitterness. It is an irascible old man that looks at us from the photograph of Peacock taken in his later years. "God bless my soul, Sir," exclaimed the Reverend Dr. Folliott, bursting into the breakfast room at Crotchett Castle, "I am out of all patience with this march of mind." And so he was; but his impatience did not interfere with his fundamental, his really imperturbable good humor; it did not spoil his breakfast.

Peacock was a realist and a Tory. He believed in custom and tradition. He disliked the diffusion of education, the growth of democracy, the march

of mind. He believed—or liked to pretend that he believed—that our ancestors "saw true men, when we see false knaves. They saw Milton, and we see Mr. Sachut." Like Dr. Johnson, he held that a man who is not in earnest about his dinner should be suspected of inaccuracy in other matters. Unlike Dr. Johnson, he believed in the efficacy of old wine, judiciously and traditionally accommodated to the progress of a good dinner. "The current of opinion sets in favor of Hock: but I am for Madeira; I do not fancy Hock till I have laid a substratum of Maderia." "He believed in Greek as 'the alpha and omega of all knowledge,' the only key to the temple of the Muses—the Greek of Sophocles's choruses, to be mastered 'constructively, mythologically, and metrically.'"

These are tenets which might well supply an entertaining writer; but they would not keep him sweet for a century. The secret of Peacock is not in his whimsies and crotchets, nor in his sturdy politics, nor even in his wit and humor; it lies in his love of beauty, and his love of beauty is romantic. Perhaps, indeed, Realism and Toryism produce their finest effects in literature when they are in some degree irrationalized by a poet's frenzy, a saving grace of moonshine. We may think of Dr. Johnson, who wished to have seen the Great Wall of China ("I am serious, sir!"), and did visit the Hebrides in search of what we should call Romance. Peacock, like Johnson, was a poet, whose inspiration did not flow readily in the channels of versification. He wrote a good deal of verse in his youth, but little of it is remembered or memorable—though the novels are embellished with some rare Bacchanalian songs. But he is always poetical and romantic in his treatment of mountain scenery, and of romantic youth and maidens, and of Greek poetry. He places his puppets in a romantic situation, for the express purpose, as it seems, of making them and it ridiculous. He succeeds; but in the moment of success a spirit of contradiction comes to his rescue, and turns absurdity to beauty. So the topsy-turvy morality of "Maid Marian" is saved from burlesque by its chivalry and the half-light of the forest; and the satire of "The Misfortunes of Elphin," for all that its objects are greed, sloth, lust, and drunkenness, is conducted, like "Twelfth Night" and the "Birds" of Aristophanes, in the region of pure comic poetry.

This story, as its admirers know, is the quintessence of Peacock and his highest artistic achievement. It contains the Falstaffian figure of Seithenyn, the incompetent guardian of that ancient breakwater, the ruin of which caused the inundation of Gwaod, obliterated a principality, and reduced its Prince to a fisherman, but did little disservice to the criminal, who made his escape in an empty wine-barrel and lived to empty many more. Being unburdened with a conscience, Seithenyn retains his magnificent power of potation and ratiocination, which must secure his acquittal in any poetic court; and provides a background against which the more generous virtues of his juniors and betters shine the more conspicuous. They stand out, also, against a superb natural background of sea and mountain; and the exercise of their youthful virtues is painted in pellucid prose. Peacock's descriptive powers, here used with a master's economy, enable him to sketch a scene with surpassing vividness. There are few passages in English literature which equal for pictorial effect the catastrophe of "Elphin," when at the height of the tempest the neglected rampart is severed, the walls collapse, and the sea rushes in on the bewildered banqueters. Drunk or sober, they are revealed by the lightning and the flaring beacon—the fuddled warden and his retainers, his lovely daughter, the enamored prince, the frenzied bard. The innocents, being in a condition to walk, make good their escape along the rampart. The fate of the drunkards is left obscure; but we are allowed to suppose them engulfed, and a delightful surprise is prepared for a later chapter, when the identity of the chief culprit is discovered.

Beside witchcraft of this quality, the mundane prose of Peacock's ordinary manner has a coarser flavor. But even his least romantic symposia, from which the clash of the elements and the primitive passions is excluded, deserve degustation for their wit and polish. It is a dry wine, but well matured; and there are no dregs.

## A Fighting Reconciler

"MY DEAR CORNELIA." By STUART P. SHERMAN. Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press. 1924. \$2.50.

Reviewed by SIDNEY COX.

MR. SHERMAN reconciles in himself many and strong conflicting interests and desires. And that equips him for the unending fight to reconcile the conflicting interests and desires of our world. Always a manly moralist, he is becoming more of an artist. Still so clear and crisp as to exclude important delicate nuances of reality, his thought becomes less arrogantly obtuse to the confusing colored lights of antic revery. His short-necked, heavy-shouldered intellectuality is perceptibly relaxed beneath the warm, caressing arm of emotional realization. And as he grows more gracious and inclusive he does not at all relinquish the uniquely powerful faith that exalts him to the doughty champion of patient, furnished, uncompromising thought.

At odds with both the theorists who speak of progress as if the millenium were just ahead, and the disheartened who speak of consciousness and conscience as aggravations of the curse, Mr. Sherman has always proclaimed both private and social usefulness in concentrating all our human resources on making the best of life. But in early essays like those on Butler and in certain comments on contemporaries he has been derisive and defiant in his proclamation. It has seemed that his intellectual directness and the defined purpose of his inquiries were rendering him oblivious to subtle incongruities not allowed for in the framing of his problems. It has seemed that in his confidence in the utility of summoning all our human resources he was indignantly rejecting the resources of disgust, rebellion and disillusionment.

But in "My Dear Cornelia," Mr. Sherman is no longer sharply definite, like his former adversary, Mr. H. L. Mencken. When Mr. Sherman seems to take his stand in too clear opposition, it is because he sees the truth he emphasizes is in disfavor and the truth involved in the position he attacks is so obvious it requires no disentanglement. His intense love of clarity will always, at intervals, be inflicting twinges on the very subtle.

Surely, though, it is more admirable to be a fighting reconciler than a so consummate reconciler that all desire for action is swallowed up in the questionable victory of mystic death. Mr. Sherman will not resign the struggle in order to achieve immediate annihilating union with the universal mystery. His own words in the specially imaginative and appropriately indefinite "Book Five: Approaching Religion and Other Grave Matters" indicate how he reconciles religion and realism: "I half suspect that God Himself admires most those who 'surrender' to Him only with their last breath." He manfully welcomes responsibility in "the indistinguished mixture of life" and disdains the "beatific mood which—will ensure you against the pain and bitterness of reality."

Yet probably few mystics care more than Mr. Sherman for the unnamable, the essential, the spiritual. And one way of stating his whole effort is: the reconciliation of a bold confronting of concrete necessity in economic, and fleshly, and all sorts of circumstances with a steady and unrelaxing grasp of the inseparable ideal qualities.

Such a beating of swords against each other that at last ploughshares are welded, such a collision of spears as bends both back into pruning hooks, such a violent reconciliation makes Mr. Sherman's present power as a writer. Erudition is reconciled with everydayness, racy idiom with courtly elegance. Gaiety is harmonized with earnestness. Severe sincerity is fused with humorous, ironic but not sarcastic, tolerance.

And a book of moral criticism dealing with marriage, education, careers for women, prohibition, politics, and religion is achieved in which the reader finds, in vivid scenes, distinct, interesting personalities, especially the author, struggling to make the best of difficult and dangerous relationships. The reader is not offered conclusions, he is invited to see what he can do in similar perplexed, ironic situations.

In fact, the book of discussions, "My Dear Cornelia," is more imaginative and less didactic than many a noteworthy novel. And it is more philosophical than many a solemn treatise. Such reconciliation of opposites by means of joining issue is creative criticism.