

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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NUMBER I

### Library and Community

IT would seem a work of supererogation to point out the importance to the community of the library were it not for the fact that in the greatest city of the country library appropriations have been systematically cut down for the past five years. If New York can have had its library funds progressively scaled off, with all that such action implies of insufficiency of money for the purchase of books and inadequate salaries for librarians, then evidently recognition of the value of the library to the state has not yet come to the politicians and is too generally taken for granted by those who should command them. For there can be no dispute among thinking people as to the eminence of the library among institutions making for the public welfare. The school alone surpasses it as a means to the education of the people, and it alone with the school possesses the supreme distinction of affording a medium through which deliberate direction can be given on a large scale to the formation of taste and the development of standards. For the movies, with their almost boundless potentialities for the education of the masses, are still too inchoate in their aims, too completely commercial in their inspiration, to exert a fraction of the elevating influence that might well be theirs, and the press, unfortunately dependent, or at least deeming itself dependent, upon the popular taste for its very existence in large measure fails to realize on its opportunities for uplifting it. But the library stands foursquare to the ignorance and the prejudices and the predilections of the people. It contains in its heterogeneity food for every shade of opinion, and yet its comprehensiveness is not so all embracing but that it has been delivered of the obnoxious and the injurious. It is in the strategic position of an institution which exerts a selective influence without appearing to impose restrictions.

Indeed the library stands to the community in the relation of a wise guardian, a guardian who realizes that freedom of choice is a first essential to the enjoyment and development of its wards, but who yet believes that that choice should be safeguarded. Not that libraries, the best of them, do not contain an infinitude of books that measured by any standards of literary worth are negligible, but that their selection is made with a view to including all that is most worth preserving and nothing that is pernicious. They are the happy hunting grounds of the inquisitive mind, where the biggest game may be had for the stalking. They are the forcing beds of knowledge, and wisdom, and humanity, and they surely are deserving of all the support that a benevolent state and an enlightened public opinion can give them.

Whoever has seen a trim small library in an isolated community, with its rows of classics and shelves of new books offering relief from the monotony of village existence, knows what the library is to the rural districts. Whoever has watched the ranks of readers poring over their books in the libraries of the great cities realizes the enormous impetus to culture that they afford. The more complicated living grows, the more it knows of hurly-burly and the less it has of leisurely contemplation, the more essential is it that whatever forces make for light and lead have full play. Among them none is more with possibility than the library, none more accessible to those who

### Grandeur of Ghosts

By SIEGFRIED SASSOON

WHEN I have heard small talk about great men  
I climb to bed; light my two candles;  
then  
Consider what was said; and put aside  
What Such-a-one remarked and Someone-else replied.

They have spoken lightly of my deathless friends,  
(*Lamps for my gloom, hands guiding where I stumble,*)

Quoting, for shallow conversational ends,  
What Shelley shrilled, what Blake once wildly muttered . . .

How can they use such names and be not humble?  
I have sat silent; angry at what they uttered.  
The dead bequeathed them life; the dead have said  
What these can only memorize and mumble.

### This Week

"The Torch-Bearers." Reviewed by  
*Sir Oliver Lodge.*

"Edward Everett." Reviewed by *M. A. DeWolfe Howe.*

"The Public Life." Reviewed by  
*Sir A. Maurice Low.*

"The Thunderstorm." Reviewed by  
*A. Hamilton Gibbs.*

"A History of Agriculture." Reviewed by  
*Nelson Antrim Crawford.*

"St. Mawr." Reviewed by *Louis Kronenberger.*

Mockbeggar. By *Christopher Ward.*

The Bowling Green. By *Christopher Morley.*

### Next Week, or Later

Essays by *Rebecca West, H. M. Tomlinson, Anne Douglas Sedgwick, John Galsworthy.*

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would seek it, none more necessary to be fostered. We should deem it absurd to utter so trite a generalization did not the facts confront its universal currency. Evidently there are still those who doubt the worth of the library. There can be

no hinge nor loop  
To hang a doubt on.

### American Fiction

By VIRGINIA WOOLF

EXCURSIONS into the literature of a foreign country much resemble our travels abroad. Sights that are taken for granted by the inhabitants seem to us astonishing; however well we seemed to know the language at home, it sounds differently on the lips of those who have spoken it from birth; and above all, in our desire to get at the heart of the country we seek out whatever it may be that is most unlike what we are used to, and declaring this to be the very essence of the French or American genius proceed to lavish upon it a credulous devotion, to build up upon it a structure of theory which may well amuse, annoy, or even momentarily enlighten those who are French or American by birth.

The English tourist in American literature wants above all things something different from what he has at home. For this reason the one American writer whom the English whole-heartedly admire is Walt Whitman. There, you will hear them say, is the real American undisguised. In the whole of English literature there is no figure which resembles his—among all our poetry none in the least comparable to "Leaves of Grass." This very unlikeness becomes a merit, and leads us, as we steep ourselves in the refreshing unfamiliarity, to become less and less able to appreciate Emerson, Lowell, Hawthorne, who have had their counterparts among us and drew their culture from our books. The obsession, whether well or ill founded, fair or unfair in its results, persists at the present moment. To dismiss such distinguished names as those of Henry James, Mr. Hergesheimer, and Mrs. Wharton would be impossible; but their praises are qualified with the reservation—they are not Americans; they do not give us anything that we have not got already.

Thus having qualified the tourist's attitude, in its crudity and oneness, let us begin our excursion into modern American fiction by asking what are the sights we ought to see. Here our bewilderment begins; for the names of so many authors, the titles of so many books, rise at once to the lips. Mr. Dreiser, Mr. Cabell, Miss Canfield, Mr. Sherwood Anderson, Miss Hurst, Mr. Sinclair Lewis, Miss Willa Cather, Mr. Ring Lardner—all have done work which, if time allowed, we should do well to examine carefully, and, if we must concentrate upon two or three at most, it is because, travellers and tourists as we are, it seems best to sketch a theory of the tendency of American fiction from the inspection of a few important books rather than to examine each writer separately by himself. Of all American novelists the most discussed and read in England at the present moment are probably Mr. Sherwood Anderson and Mr. Sinclair Lewis. And among all their fiction we find one volume, "A Story Teller's Story," which, being fact rather than fiction, may serve as interpreter, may help us to guess the nature of American writers' problems before we see them tussled with or solved. Peering over Mr. Sherwood Anderson's shoulder, we may get a preliminary view of the world as it looks to the novelist before it is disguised and arranged for the reception of his characters. Indeed, if we look over Mr. Anderson's shoulder, America appears a very strange place. What is it that we see here? A vast continent, scattered here and there with brand new villages which nature has not absorbed into herself with ivy and moss, summer and winter, as in England, but man has built recently, hastily, economically, so that

the village is like the suburb of a town. The slow English wagons are turned into Ford cars; the primrose banks have become heaps of old tins; the barns, sheds of corrugated iron. It is cheap, it is new, it is ugly, it is made of odds and ends, hurriedly flung together, loosely tied in temporary cohesion—that is the burden of Mr. Anderson's complaint. And, he proceeds to ask, how can the imagination of an artist take root here, where the soil is stony and the imagination stubs itself upon the rocks? There is one solution and one only—by being resolutely and defiantly American. Explicitly and implicitly that is the conclusion he reaches; that is the note which turns the discord to harmony. Mr. Anderson is forever repeating over and over like a patient hypnotizing himself, "I am the American man." The words rise in his mind with the persistency of a submerged but fundamental desire. Yes, he is the American man; it is a terrible misfortune; it is an enormous opportunity; but for good or for bad, he is the American man. "Behold in me the American man striving to become an artist, to become conscious of himself, filled with wonder concerning himself and others, trying to have a good time and not fake a good time. I am not English, Italian, Jew, German, Frenchman, Russian. What am I?" Yes, we may be excused for repeating, what is he? One thing is certain—whatever the American man may be he is not English; whatever he may become, he will not become an Englishman.

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For that is the first step in the process of being American—to be not English. The first step in the education of an American writer is to dismiss the whole army of English words which have marched so long under the command of dead English generals. He must tame and compel to his service the "little American words;" he must forget all that he learnt in the school of Fielding and Thackeray; he must learn to write as he talks to men in Chicago barrooms, to men in the factories of Indiana. That is the first step; but the next step is far more difficult. For having decided what he is not, he must be determined to discover what he is. This is the beginning of a stage of acute self-consciousness which manifests itself in writers otherwise poles asunder. Nothing, indeed, surprises the English tourist more than the prevalence of this self-consciousness and the bitterness, for the most part against England, with which it is accompanied. One is reminded constantly of the attitude of another race, till lately subject and still galled by the memory of its chains. Women writers have to meet many of the same problems that beset Americans. They too are conscious of their own peculiarities as a sex; apt to suspect insolence, quick to avenge grievances, eager to shape an art of their own. In both cases all kinds of consciousness—consciousness of self, of race, of sex, of civilization—which have nothing to do with art, have got between them and the paper, with results that are, on the surface at least, unfortunate. It is easy enough to see that Mr. Anderson, for example, would be a much more perfect artist if he could forget that he is an American; he would write better prose if he could use all words impartially, new or old, English or American, classical or slang.

Nevertheless as we turn from his autobiography to his fiction we are forced to own (as some women writers also make us own) that to come fresh to the world, to turn a new angle to the light, is so great an achievement that for its sake we can pardon the bitterness, the self-consciousness, the angularity which inevitably go with it. In "The Triumph of the Egg" there is some rearrangement of the old elements of art which makes us rub our eyes. The feeling recalls that with which we read Chekhov for the first time. There are no familiar handles to lay hold of in "The Triumph of the Egg." The stories baffle our efforts, slip through our fingers and leave us feeling, not that it is Mr. Anderson, who has failed us, but that we as readers have muffed our work and must go back, like chastened schoolchildren, and spell the lesson over again in the attempt to lay hold of the meaning.

Mr. Anderson has bored into that deeper and warmer layer of human nature which it would be frivolous to ticket new or old, American or European. In his determination to be "true to the essence of things" he has fumbled his way into something genuine, persistent, of universal significance, in proof of which he has done what, after all, very few writers succeed in doing—he has made a world of his own. It is a world in which the senses

flourish; it is dominated by instincts rather than by ideas; race horses make the hearts of little boys beat high; cornfields flow around the cheap towns like golden seas, illimitable and profound; everywhere boys and girls are dreaming of voyages and adventures, and this world of sensuality and instinctive desire is clothed in a warm cloudy atmosphere, wrapped about in a soft caressing envelope, which always seems a little too loose to fit the shape. Pointing to the formlessness of Mr. Anderson's work, the vagueness of his language, his tendency to land his stories softly in a bog, the English tourist would say that all this confirms him in his theory of what is to be expected of an American writer of insight and sincerity. The softness, the shelliness of Mr. Anderson are inevitable since he has scooped out from the heart of America matter which has never been confined in a shell before. He is too much enamoured of this precious stuff to squeeze it into any of those old and intricate poems which the art and industry of Europe have secreted. Rather he will leave what he has found exposed, defenceless, naked to scorn and laughter.

But if this theory holds good of the work of American novelists, how then are we to account for the novels of Mr. Sinclair Lewis? Does it not explode at the first touch of "Babbitt" and "Main Street" and "Our Mr. Wrenn" like a soap bubble dashed against the edge of a hard mahogany wardrobe? For it is precisely by its hardness, its efficiency, its compactness that Mr. Lewis's work excels. Yet he also is an American; he also has devoted book after book to the description and elucidation of America. Far from being shellless, however, his books, one is inclined to say, are all shell; the only doubt is whether he has left any room for the snail. At any rate "Babbitt" completely refutes the theory that an American writer, writing about America, must necessarily lack the finish, the technique, the power to model and control his material which one might suppose to be the bequest of an old civilization to its artists. In all these respects, "Babbitt" is the equal of any novel written in English in the present century. The tourist therefore must make his choice between two alternatives. Either there is no profound difference between English and American writers, and their experience is so similar that it can be housed in the same form; or Mr. Lewis has modelled himself so closely upon the English—H. G. Wells is a very obvious master—that he has sacrificed his American characteristics in the process. But the art of reading would be simpler and less adventurous than it is if writers could be parcelled out in strips of green and blue. Study of Mr. Lewis more and more convinces us that the surface appearance of downright decision is deceptive; the outer composure hardly holds together the warring elements within; the colors have run.

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For though "Babbitt" would appear as solid and authentic a portrait of the American business man as can well be painted, certain doubt runs across us and shake our conviction. But, we may ask, where all is so masterly, self-assured and confident, what foothold can there be for doubt to lodge upon? To begin with we doubt Mr. Lewis himself: we doubt that is to say that he is nearly as sure of himself or of his subject as he would have us believe. For he, too, though in a way very different from Mr. Anderson's way, is writing with one eye on Europe, a division of attention which the reader is quick to feel and resent. He too has the American self-consciousness though it is masterfully suppressed, and allowed only to utter itself once or twice in a sharp cry of bitterness ("Babbitt was as much amused by the antiquated provincialism as any proper Englishman by any American.") But the uneasiness is there. He has not identified himself with America; rather he has constituted himself the guide and interpreter between the Americans and the English, and, as he conducts his party of Europeans over the typical American city (of which he is a native) and shows them the typical American citizen (to whom he is related) he is equally divided between shame at what he has to show and anger at the Europeans for laughing at it. Zenith is a despicable place, but the English are even more despicable for despising it.

In such an atmosphere intimacy is impossible. All that a writer of Mr. Lewis's powers can do is to be unflinchingly accurate and more and more on his guard against giving himself away. Accordingly, never was so complete a model of a city made

before. We turn on the taps and the water runs; we press a button and cigars are lit and beds warmed. But this glorification of machinery, this lust for "toothpastes, socks, tires, cameras, instantaneous hot water bottles. . . at first the signs, then the substitutes for joy and passion and wisdom" is only a device for putting off the evil day which Mr. Lewis sees looming ahead. However he may dread what people will think of him, he must give himself away. Babbitt must be proved to possess some share in truth and beauty, some character, some emotion of his own, or Babbitt will be nothing but an improved device for running motor cars, a convenient surface for the display of mechanical ingenuity. To make us care for Babbitt—that was his problem.

With this end in view Mr. Lewis shamefacedly assures us that Babbitt has his dreams. Stout though he is, this elderly business man dreams of a fairy child waiting at a gate. "Her dear and tranquil hand caressed his cheek. He was gallant and wise and well-beloved; warm ivory were her arms; and beyond perilous moors the brave sea glittered." But that is not a dream; that is simply the protest of a man who has never dreamed in his life but is determined to prove that dreaming is as easy as shell-peas. What are dreams made of—the most expensive dreams? Seas, fairies, moors? Well, he will have a little of each, and if that is not a dream, he seems to demand, jumping out of bed in a fury, what then is it? With sex relations and family affection he is much more at ease. Indeed it would be impossible to deny that if we put our ears to his shell, the foremost citizen in Zenith can be heard moving cumbrously but unmistakably within. One has moments of affection for him, moments of sympathy and even of desire that some miracle may happen, the rock be cleft asunder, and the living creature, with his capacity for fun, suffering, and happiness be set at liberty. But no; his movements are too sluggish; Babbitt will never escape; he will die in his prison bequeathing only the chance of escape to his son.

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In some such way as this, then, the English tourist makes his theory embrace both Mr. Anderson and Mr. Sinclair Lewis. Both suffer as novelists from being American; Mr. Anderson, because he must protest his pride; Mr. Lewis, because he must conceal his bitterness. Mr. Anderson's way is the less injurious to him as an artist, and his imagination is the more vigorous of the two. He has gained more than he has lost by being the spokesman of a new country, the worker in fresh clay. Mr. Lewis it would seem was meant by nature to take his place with Mr. Wells and Mr. Bennett, and had he been born in England would undoubtedly have proved himself the equal of these two famous men. Denied however the richness of an old civilization—the swarm of ideas upon which the art of Mr. Wells has battened, the solidity of custom which has nourished the art of Mr. Bennett—he has been forced to criticize rather than to explore, and the object of his criticism—the civilization of Zenith—was unfortunately too meagre to sustain him. Yet a little reflection, and a comparison between Mr. Anderson and Mr. Lewis, put a different color on our conclusion. Look at Americans as an American, see Mrs. Opal Emerson Mudge as she is herself, not as a type and symbol of America displayed for the amusement of the condescending Britisher, and then, we dimly suspect, Mrs. Mudge is no type, no scarecrow, no abstraction. Mrs. Mudge is—but it is not for an English writer to say what. He can only peep and peer between the chinks of the barrier and hazard the opinion that Mrs. Mudge and the Americans generally are, somehow, human beings into the bargain.

That suspicion suddenly becomes a certainty as we read the first pages of Mr. Ring Lardner's "You Know Me, Al," and the change is bewildering. Hitherto we have been kept at arms' length, reminded constantly of our superiority, of our inferiority, of the fact, anyhow, that we are alien blood and bone. But Mr. Lardner is not merely unaware that we differ; he is unaware that we exist. When a crack player is in the middle of an exciting game of baseball he does not stop to wonder whether the audience likes the color of his hair. All his mind is on the game. So Mr. Lardner does not waste a moment when he writes in thinking whether he is using American slang or Shakespeare's English; whether he is remembering Fielding or forgetting Fielding; whether he is proud of being American