

A Powerful Novel

THE MONKEY PUZZLE. By J. D. BERESFORD. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1925. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JOHAN J. SMERTENKO

AT last J. D. Beresford has broken through. These are hardly the words to describe his carefully controlled story and his artfully articulated thesis except in so far as "The Monkey Puzzle" has torn aside the invisible barrier that keeps an author's work the select pastures of a few rather than the favorite common of a large following. I have consciously put this prophecy in the past tense to indicate the certainty of its fulfilment. "The Monkey Puzzle" will have paeans sung in its honor as long as a judge of good literature has breath to utter its praises.

To deserve this Mr. Beresford has done the following things:

He has unquestionably chosen one of the most pertinent problems of our time for his theme. What can those men and women who are in step with the age, whose morality and philosophy are born of the enlightenment and development in the twentieth century, whose needs and desires are also children of the physical and spiritual riches recently uncovered—what can they do, pray, when the life they lead in accordance with this new spirit conflicts—as it inevitably must—with the mediæval conceptions and taboos held by the incogitant masses? What shall Brenda, beautiful and clean, do against the salacious, sadist Mrs. Priestley and the Village? What can Tristram, brave, honest, powerful, do against the concupiscent, venomous vicar's wife and the equally prurient, sanctimonious vicar, and the Village? And, of course, the heedless genius, Mattocks, is doomed at the very first contact with the foul-minded, impervious Village and its toughs.

Make no mistake. Mr. Beresford meets the question fairly. These persons are not low-caste Bohemians battling against organized society for the right to be abnormal. Tristram and Brenda Wing are lord and lady of the manor. They own the Village; they give the vicar his living; it is by their permission that Mrs. Priestley finds lodgings with Miss Latimer; and as Judge, Tristram might easily pay off Popple and the ruffians. Nevertheless, the toughs are unpunished, the vicarage is victorious and the Village unassailable.

Yet the answer is far from being stark tragedy. And that is another thing Mr. Beresford has done. The children, Mr. and Mrs. Fullerton, and even the tragic protagonists themselves serve as constant comic relief. Here is a story more powerful in its presentation of painful, overwhelming futility than Dostoevsky's "Idiot," yet it never disarranges the punctilious combination of trivialities which constitutes the normal course of English country life. There is no undefined craving, no muddled abstraction, no impotent frenzy; there is poise and certainty and good taste.

Mr. Beresford, in other words, has mastered his medium. He has put his theme in a compact and thrilling story of love and conflict; and he is as convincing in his thesis as he is compelling in his plot. But, more than that, he is the first author I know who has utilized the teachings of contemporary psychology as a novelist rather than as a registrar. He has not been content to label hopeless manikins out of Dr. Freud's nomenclature but, having assimilated the magic knowledge that reveals personality, he has drawn his characters with as little recourse to the terminology of psychoanalysis as had Shakespeare.

Finally, Mr. Beresford has given his story the permanent beauty of a sure and matured style, exquisite in its simplicity, charming in its whimsy and effective in its reality.

"I shall ask mummy, then," Elise replied. "Unless you'll tell us, father?" she concluded hopefully.

"Does mummy tell you everything you ask her?" he said.

"She always tries to," Elise boasted, quite aware of her mother's unusual quality. "Course, there's some things I can't understand till I'm a bit older, things like 'electricity' and there not being really any up and down; but this isn't one of those sort, is it?"

"I'm not at all sure whether it is or not," Tristram said, with a whimsical smile, thinking of Elise's second instance. "Everything comes back to relativity in some kind of way."

Elise screwed up her face. "Things like Mr. Orpin's nose?" she asked, and then: "Does mine do it?"

Her father shook his head. "No, I'm glad you haven't got a nose like Mr. Orpin, Elise," he said.

"Why?" she asked, opening her eyes very wide.

"It wouldn't look pretty on you," he told her. "That wasn't what you meant, father," she protested; "because I just know it wasn't. Father, has Mr. Orpin done something horrid?"

Tristram shook his head. "I'm not going to answer any more questions," he continued. "You'd better talk to mummy."

"She tells us everything," Elise boasted for the second time.

The adult conversation is naturally more profound; it is no less playful, however. What it loses of naïveté and nonsense, it gains of wisdom and humor. The reader moves from incident to incident unto the inevitable climax on a steady, sparkling current emotionally deep and wide in filiation.

Crepitant Fantasy

FIRECRACKERS. By CARL VAN VECHTEN. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1925.

Reviewed by HENRY B. FULLER

THE most favorable account of this sprightly book, extracted from material within itself, would make it a whimsical, fantastic plea for the Life Athletic. The exceptional and Protean hero is an acrobat who, up to the time of calamitously falling in love, lives in a happy union of physical and psychical soundness—"understanding how to be happy and intelligent at the same time." The sub-heroine, a clever and blasé child of ten, deserts society for the trapeze and the parallel bars. Even her governess, having fitted herself out with the necessary accompaniment of pseudo-philosophical flim-flam, opens a gymnasium for the



Adenez, King of the Minstrels, reciting before the Queen of France. From "Life in Mediæval France," by Joan Evans (Oxford University Press).

children of the wealthy and prominent. And a picturesque group of "professionals" serves to show what the Great City can yield in curios to the searching eye, and to remind us how essential to the trained body is the virtuous life.

However, the life athletic is frequently superseded, in these pages, by the life luxurious—using the word in its most lexicographical sense. This takes us, perhaps inappropriately, into the realm of the archaic and the obsolete: an injustice, it may be, to pages that are nothing if not modern and current. Yet the pursuit of a young man by an older woman—even by an elderly woman—has become rather too common of late, whether in book or play. Perhaps it marks, as well as anything else, the advance of a "civilization" which has advanced too far. The present pages revive the luxurious heroine of "The Blind Bow-Boy" to trouble the established peace of the youthful hero; and they even detail the concluding adventures of the amorous heroine of "The Tattooed Countess." "Young Love," as sung by the poets and as pictured by earlier novelists, seems far enough away.

Mr. Van Vechten explains his title with some particularity. We are to think of his group of people "in terms of a packet of firecrackers." It's all in the application of the match. If you fail to apply it the bunch remains but a collection of separate entities, explosionless and without inter-reactions. But ignite the first firecracker and there succeeds a series of crackling detonations, involving

the explosion of the whole bunch. Mr. Van Vechten applies the match: the crackers act and react. Of course, a bunch of firecrackers seldom goes off with well-spaced symmetry. "Firecrackers," therefore, cannot quite claim the studied regularity of "The Tattooed Countess," yet it is not so whimsically irregular as "Peter Whiffle." Indeed, at the very end, the chief crackers explode in a fine, effective unison, and so bring this highly crepitant book to such a close as shall not fail to reach the ears of the most heedless.

Throughout the author is concerned with New York—the naughty, semi-fantastic, and somewhat exotic city which he has made for himself: made in his own image, if one may borrow words from a higher source. He is "high," too; and he is also diverting; and being both, his dedication to Mr. Cabell seems appropriate enough. His extremely individualistic pages lead one on easily and irresistibly. One becomes a participant—almost an accomplice. If one scarcely knows now and then—subject-matter considered—whether to be glad or sorry, he can make up his account by crediting all this light-handed whimsy and invention to that phase in the evolution of a metropolitan centre which gives it, eventually, a fairy-tale in consonance with its own nature and taste. The artist, true, may have been born beyond its bounds, yet he is best nourished within them. Mr. Van Vechten will doubtless leave any metropolitan epic to other pens, but his own seems equal to turning the peculiar lyrics that the "time" and the "place"—to borrow the language of the playbill—alike call for.

Some Poets Explain

THE WAY OF THE MAKERS. By MARGUERITE WILKINSON. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1925. \$3.

Reviewed by MUNA LEE

TWELVE hundred years ago, more or less, Aldhelm wrote the first study of verse made by an Englishman. The intervening millennium has produced a great many authorities have not only codified the laws of English but have explained with varying degrees of tableness just how—if one may venture a modernism—poets get that way. Poets themselves have sometimes protested against the motives attributed to them; and often enough have worked on in blissful ignorance of the methods they were assumed to pursue. Meanwhile, it has usually been the critic and not the poet who is asked to explain how as well as why poetry is written; perhaps on the theory that we ask a jeweler and not an oyster to evaluate a pearl.

Shelley lying upon a hearth rug with his head to the blaze that the heat might stimulate his brain to poetic activity; Swift in his nightcap, swathed in blankets and propped upon pillows in a draughty lodging-house, scribbling verses to Stella amid the thickening cold; Wordsworth walking the hills with his terrier, and, on the achievement of "a lovely Image in the song" darting at the hapless animal to "let loose My hand upon his back in stormy joy" . . . what do they prove, the three of them, as to the influences favoring composition? Well, to be reasonable, they prove nothing—no three scattered examples could prove anything, taken by themselves. Individual differences (and any half-dozen poets will evidence the extent of variation) are quite naturally responsible for differences in method; while the deeper questions of motive and underlying inspiration may well prove indeterminable. Nevertheless, very interesting deductions can be drawn from the collated testimony of many poets; and it is precisely this tabulation of data which Mrs. Wilkinson has made her purpose in the entertaining, informative, and richly suggestive volume under review. She has in general compiled the declarations of the poets; then stated her own brief *posteriori* conclusions; and it is no reflection on her work as editor and critic to say that the mass of material she presents is in itself more interesting than any editorial summing-up could be.

The volume is divided into seven sections: "The Poetic Nature," "The Poet's Travail," "The Primary Inspiration," "The Secondary Inspiration," "Themes for Poems," "How Poets Work," and, finally, "Concerning Fame," in which latter division the poets not only define and estimate the value of fame, but appraise contemporary criticism, the verdict upon which seems to change little from

generation to generation. In every case Mrs. Wilkinson has drawn her illustrative material from the poets themselves, with selections ranging from the sixteenth century to the present; the comments being sometimes embodied in a poem, again in extracts from letters and diaries, as well as from more formal prose. Spenser's "Goe, litel boke" is here; Shelley's "Statue of Minerva;" Elinor Wylie's "Jeweled Bindings;" citations from Milton, Coleridge, Chaucer, Padraic Colum, Santayana, *et al.*

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The witnesses show a fair amount of unanimity in defining the poetic nature. Its child-like responsiveness to both the external and the spiritual universe and its play with make-believe are testified to by Emerson, Francis Thompson, Dr. Johnson, George E. Woodberry; while Walter de la Mare, in accord with the foregoing, cautions us to remember that the distinctive qualities of childhood are in fact gravity and imagination. There is less uniformity in the report upon the methods of work and the impulse toward it. Dryden's letter on his St. Cecilia Ode suggests one powerful stimulus—or rather, two: the writing of the ode is "troublesome and in no way beneficial," he complains in a letter to his son, "but I could not deny the stewards of the feast who came in a body to desire that kindness . . . I hope to send you thirty guineas between Michaelmas and Christmas." The perfect contrast to this mixture of moral and pecuniary urge is Byron's summary of his day: "Today I have boxed an hour—written an ode on Napoleon Bonaparte—eaten six biscuits—drunk four bottles of soda water—read away the rest of my time—besides giving poor — a world of advice about the mistress of his, who is plaguing him into a phthisic and intolerable tediousness." What poets seem always to regard as the greatest and most uncommon material boon is freedom from petty worry: most of them testify that while Grief is usually a creative influence, minor preoccupations result in a deadly sapping of power. "Do you know Vexation, the slayer?" Meredith asks in a letter to the Rev. Mr. Jessop. "There is very little poetry to be done when one is severely and incessantly harassed."

As regards the "primary inspiration," it would seem that most poets see it as a rushing wind, demoniac possession, a power descending. Coleridge defines it as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite *I am*." Emerson says that "The universal nature, too strong for the petty nature of the bard, sits on his neck and writes through his hand." Anna Hempstead Branch finds that "writing poetry is a process of listening." And A. E.'s characteristic explanation is that "the mortal in us has memory of all wisdom."

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It is interesting to note that what Mrs. Wilkinson—following Coleridge's classification—calls the secondary inspiration, the immediate impulse toward the making of a given poem, is frequently a word, a phrase, which proves to be the germ of poetry, the grain of sand which is to be nucleus of the pearl. The thought comes first, shaping the form, Emerson tells us; and his idea fundamentally is but a variation of Ben Jonson's comment that "There cannot be one color of the mind; another of the wit." There are many voices to warn us, however, that a poet's symbol must not be too rigorously applied to himself. Certainly the ear as well as the voice colors a tone. It is well to remember that poetry, at least lyric poetry, is largely suggestive.

In the section on working method, it is worthy of the novice's attention that many of his betters advise that the poem should be set down only after it has matured within the mind; cautioning that radical change in a poem once drafted is difficult. It would seem almost universal experience that the initial choice of form generally precludes changing to another: a sonnet will remain a sonnet, not successfully becoming blank verse nor quatrains; though in the perfected version there may be hardly a phrase which stands in words identical with those of the first draft. Even Pope, lover of perfection, advises against too much fussing with the poem: "In poetry, as in painting," he says, "a man may lay colors one upon another till they stiffen and deaden the piece."

If one is to judge by the comments in the closing pages of the book, all poets in all ages have discounted the value of contemporary criticism, with its long list of atrocities; but they have generally

revealed their humanizing weakness by admitting its baneful power over their own spirits, valueless though it might be. About an equal number of poets seem to love solitude and to flee from it; as many seem born to express their environment as to voice a revolt against it. Evidently poetry comes into the world through many diverse gates. One fact worthy of comment is that many modern poets have begun writing comparatively late in life, as opposed to their predecessors who seem for the most part to have written "always," as the vague phrase goes. A reading of Mrs. Wilkinson's absorbingly interesting compendium gives rise to questions with a string of implications which emphasize Robert Graves's prophecy that the study of poetry will soon pass into the hands of the psychologists. Nor does there seem good reason to doubt his heartfelt conclusion, "And what a mess they'll make of it to be sure!"

A Graphic Chronicle

THE JOURNAL OF NICHOLAS CRESSWELL, 1774-1777. LINCOLN MACVEAGH: The Dial Press. 1925. \$5.

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS

A DERBYSHIRE youth of twenty-four, eager for money and adventure, sails for the American Colonies to make his fortune, and coming up the Rappahannock, finds himself in a Province seething with revolt. Believing that the discontent will soon subside, he remains. He finds work as a surveyor, and makes a frontier tour of the wild Kentucky and Ohio border, living with rough men, killing a panther, and observing Indian life. The war begins and he becomes a prisoner under parole; he goes to Philadelphia just after independence, and New York just before fighting begins there between Washington and Howe; and finally by a daring exploit he seizes a small boat at Norfolk and escapes to the British ships off Old Point Comfort. These are the materials of Nicholas Cresswell's Diary, which begins in May, 1774, and ends in the autumn of 1777, when he returned home to England. It is that rare combination, a first-hand narrative that is as interesting to the general reader as it is valuable to the historian. Indeed, there is no work on the British side—not the journals of Baroness Riedesel, or of the loyalist Samuel Curwen—that equals it. The author pretended to no literary skill, but he had what was much better, a faculty for close observation, a blunt graphic mode of expressing himself, and a frank willingness to reveal his own personality.

Cresswell was indignant from the outset at the "abominable intentions" of the rascally rebels, and throughout all vicissitudes remained a sturdily loyal Briton. His diary offers a vivid view of the growth of revolt in Virginia. In the fall of 1774 he found all business at a standstill, committees ruling, troops drilling, the King cursed, and "everything ripe for rebellion." He kept his mouth shut and watched the increasing turmoil. As early as January 19, 1776, we find him noting that "A pamphlet called 'Common Sense' makes a great noise," and the next month predicting that independence will soon be declared. Nothing else, he says, will go down. The news of independence actually reached him in Leesburg, Virginia, on July 9, and gave him great uneasiness. When he set out northward in a vain attempt to obtain full liberty, he met recruiting parties, bodies of soldiers in various towns, 400 English prisoners in Lancaster, Pa., and other signs of warfare. At New York he saw the American army, and was by no means favorably impressed by it. The Yankee troops, he remarked, were "the nastiest devils in creation," their personal habits being filthy beyond description. The army as a whole he found "numerous, but ragged, dirty, sickly, and ill-disciplined. If my countrymen are beaten by these ragamuffins I shall be much surprised." To the very end of his sojourn he remained confident of British victory. At one time, in the winter of 1776-77, he thought the rebellion about to collapse. The violent Whigs were much dispirited, the timid Whigs gave up all for lost, and the Tories of Virginia began to exult. But immediately afterward he had to admit that Washington's victory at Trenton had completely altered the aspect of the war:

Tuesday, Jan. 7, 1777. The news is confirmed. The minds of the people are much changed. A few days ago

they had given up the cause for lost. Their late successes have turned the scale and now they are all liberty mad again. Their recruiting parties could not get a man (except he bought him from his master) no longer since than last week, and now the men are coming in by companies. Confound the turncoat scoundrels and the cowardly Messians altogether. This has given them new spirits, got them fresh succours, and will prolong the war, perhaps for two years. They have recovered their panic and it will not be an easy matter to throw them into that confusion again.

Gifted with an eager curiosity, Cresswell made many social observations of interest. He describes the landing of a gang of newly imported negro slaves in Virginia, with creditable compassion for the naked, woe-begone blacks. The slovenly agriculture of the Virginia lowlands troubled his English eye, and he noted that even the greatest planters, like Washington, had little money income. "They game high," he said of the Virginians, "spend freely, and dress exceedingly gay, but I observe that they seldom show any money, it is all tobacco notes." He himself had an almost fatal experience of the wretched quackery that passed for medical attention in the Tidewater region. The diary is full of references to hard drinking, and Cresswell had no difficulty in finding boisterous companions. He complains bitterly of the tyrannical rigor of the patriot committees, but on his own testimony he was generously treated; he heard only a few vague threats of tarring and feathering, and influential men, including George Mason, befriended him. It need not be said that his account of roughing it on the Miami and Ohio Rivers is of great interest, or that his sketches of Philadelphia and New York in 1776 are valuable. The former he thought the most regular, neat, and convenient city he had ever seen, the latter he found less agreeable:

It is on a point of land with wharfs two thirds of the way round the town and very near the Sea. The town is not so regular as Philadelphia, nor so extensive, neither has it so many good buildings, but more elegant ones both public and private . . . There was a fine equestrian statue of His Majesty, but the Slesher has pulled it down and cast it into bullets. The statue of the Earl of Chatham is still standing unhurt in the attitude of an apple woman, dressed like a Roman Orator. I am not a judge, but I don't think it clever. The liberty pole, as they call it, is covered with iron bars. Streets fortified with small batteries towards the River.

* * *

Cresswell's own character is an interesting study. Frank, honorable, impulsive, he candidly admits his many weaknesses, which ranged from Indian squaws to bowls of toddy. He was a hail fellow well met to everybody, and made some unfortunate friends. His resourcefulness was demonstrated when he both made a living and placated the Virginia patriots by manufacturing nitre, while his escape was a striking exhibition of nerve. The reader takes leave of him, shearing sheep again on his father's Derbyshire farm, the war now less important to him than the unmarried daughters of Neighbor Needham, with regret. It is strange that a document of such varied interest should have lain unregarded in the drawers of the Cresswell heirs for a century and a half.

An effort is being made to save Eugene Field's old home in Chicago from being wrecked and replaced by a warehouse. Two old friends have started a movement to purchase the house and convert it into a memorial library and museum. The idea seems to be meeting with cordial support and a widespread appeal will probably be made in behalf of the plan.

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