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The Ruling Passion

SPENGLER'S provocative book, "The Decline of the West" is arousing discussion which grows wider as those who have actually read the book (no easy task) gain upon its first surveyors who skimmed it for materials to talk about. Soon his theories of history will disengage themselves from his amazing erudition, like birds from the nest, and will go winging through the popular consciousness where some may roost. Of these, the most interesting is the idea, categorically documented from period after period of human history, that in a given age of a given culture or civilization all products of man's mind are aspects of the same central characteristic. Greek mathematics, Greek tragedy, Greek war, and Greek religion are conditioned by definite qualities of a Greek mind. In the writing of lyrics as in the push toward America, the Elizabethan was consistently Elizabethan. It is an engaging theory, so much so that the temptation to apply it to our contemporaries is irresistible.

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The years 1920 to 1926 in the United States witnessed a far-swinging shift of interest from the relatively abstract to the highly concrete. Ideas which stirred, to a remarkable extent, the popular mind through the war period gave way to things. In place of a dozen controversies over principle which would draw fire from any audience, only two remain, one the unexpected result of Prohibition, the other that conflict between liberalism and orthodoxy which has been transferred from politics (which are moribund) to the church. The uplift continues, broad reforms in education are under way, there is still concern over our foreign relations, but these are not, as they say, front-page news, except when something concrete happens. They are not major interests, even for the intelligent minority. The feature of this half decade has been neither moral nor intellectual nor esthetic. It has been economic in the narrowest sense and can be phrased as "growing richer." But it is not the increase in vast fortunes that has been significant, nor even the massive wealth of the upper middle class. It is the rise into the area of bathrooms, motor cars, summer vacations, and high school or university education of substantially the whole urban and suburban population of America, leaving out the unfortunate, the backward, and areas of foreign born. The difference between the bath-tub-Ford-Saturday Evening Post stage and the Rolls-Royce-Park Avenue rare edition phase in our civilization is trivial by comparison with the abyss between the habits of the uneducated laborer of an earlier day and his white-collared offspring.

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According to Spengler, the art and literature of the new age should repeat its main attribute, but does it? The movies clearly belong, for their obsession with wealth and luxury is a reflection of the national desire to become millionaires, and the remarkable adventures on the films are an outlet for the imagination of a people too engaged in making themselves safe to take risks, and yet craving, as man always will, romance. Nor is the strong realism, which is the time's mark upon the novel and the drama, here even more than abroad, an anomaly. A generation in search of real estate and plumbing, whose chief excitement is in the stock exchange, and

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Loreine: A Horse

By ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE

SHE lifted up her head
With the proud incredible poise
Of beauty recovered
From the Mycenaean tombs.

She opened her nostrils
With the wild arrogance
Of life that knows nothing
Except that it is life.

Her slender legs
Quivered above the soft grass.
Her hard hooves
Danced among the dandelions.

Her great dark eyes
Saw all that could be seen.
Her large lips
Plucked at my coat-sleeve.

All the wisdom of the prophets
Vanished into laughter
As Loreine lifted her small foot
And pawed the air.

All the learning of the sages
Turned to ribald rubrics
When that proud head
Looked at a passing cloud.

And so, amid this godless
God-hungry generation,
Let us, my friends, take Loreine
And worship her.

She would demand nothing,
Nor would she utter thunders.
She is living, and real,
And she is beautiful.

The Literary Movement

By CHAUNCEY B. TINKER

TWO years ago Messrs. Harcourt and Brace published a volume entitled "Criticism in America: Its Function and Status," consisting of a dozen essays by eminent hands. The conservative party was represented by three professors of literature, Messrs. Woodberry, Babbitt, and Stuart Sherman; Mr. T. S. Eliot and Mr. Van Wyck Brooks spoke for the younger generation; and Mr. Mencken and Mr. Boyd for journalism. All the critics rode familiar hobbies—therein lay the peculiar attractiveness of the volume. Mr. Brownell contributed his wise and stately essay on Standards. Professor Babbitt spoke of discipline and the glory that was Greece. Mr. Sherman had much to say on behalf of Puritanism, and Mr. Mencken shot and killed a professor, crying, "Fie upon this quiet life! I want work." But, despite the fact that the authors were all seen at their best, the prevailing atmosphere was one of gloom. There was a general conviction among them that things had come to a bad pass. Some of the essayists seemed to be ashamed of our past, and all were concerned for our future.

In particular, there was an uneasiness about the future of our literature. Mr. Brooks, after berating Puritanism and New England on behalf of Young America, exclaimed, "How ill-equipped we are! Our literature has prepared no pathways for us, our leaders are themselves lost." If I understand Mr. Brooks, his notion seems to be that a certain religious and philosophical stability must precede the production of poetry. Since our national acquisitiveness is merely materialistic, he feels that our artistic prospects are not bright. This view implies a derivative origin for poetry, and might be found by some to be a little too humble. I do not see how such a theory accounts for Milton or, for that matter, how it accounts for the "immortal part" of any poet. Poetry is not the offspring of the community; it is in the world but not of it. You may have an eager, self-confident, progressive nation, such as Germany was, awaiting the advent of a world-poet—and waiting in vain. Perhaps Mr. Boyd is nearer the truth when he writes, "It is not the artist who is responsible to the community, but rather the community which must give the artist the material of which his dreams are made." True, but the community can never give him the faculty of dreaming; that he brings with him from on high.

The American people—there are, I am told, a hundred and ten millions of them—are of course responsible for much that is awry, and, as usual, they get it in the neck from essayists, foreigners, and minor prophets. We have movies and chewing gum, the eighteenth amendment and the bootlegger, bill-boards like the walls of Babylon, and lies as vivid as the flames of Hell. There is much about us that is wicked and more that is vulgar and crude; but wickedness and even vulgarity do not necessarily suffocate poetry. Milton was surrounded by much that was wicked and much more that was vulgar and crude, and he called the Younger Generation the Sons of Belial, flown with insolence and wine, yet he contrived to write poetry. But "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained" were not, in any very intelligible sense, the offspring of the community. Let the community by all means be scolded and let the Younger Generation be called names; but do not hold them responsible for our lack of a

This Week



"The War Period in American Finance." Reviewed by *Thomas W. Lamont*.

"The Psalms." Reviewed by *Henry J. Cadbury*.

"The Golden Dancer." Reviewed by *Robert B. Macdougall*.

"Less Than Kin." Reviewed by *Amy Loveman*.

The Bowling Green. By *Christopher Morley*.

Next Week, or Later

Adonis. By *Paul Valery*.

"Keats." Reviewed by *Clarence D. Thorpe*.

"Disarmament." Reviewed by *John Bakeless*.

"My Heresy." Reviewed by *Phillips E. Osgood*.

"The Romantic Comedians." Reviewed by *Henry Seidel Canby*.

Homer or a Dante. Some gifts are withheld by the Gods.

Whence comes this notion that the community is "responsible" to the artist? Do we really believe anything of the sort? I apprehend it to be a specimen of that scientific patter about the "evolution" of literature, and poetry as "reflecting its environment," which has been so peculiarly characteristic of modern criticism and scholarship. It is only partially and superficially true; the rest of it is science misapplied. Are poems subject to the same laws of development as sea-urchins? Who can establish a genuine parallel between literary and biological evolution? To talk of the "evolution" of literary types is to use a metaphor, not to trace the operation of a law. Who shall convince a scientist that the rise and fall of a literary school—say of the Elizabethan drama—bears any true resemblance to the rise and fall of a species—say of the ichthyosaurides? Scientists have long protested against the careless use of the word *evolution* and the adoption, by the uninformed, of scientific terms caught up from popular handbooks of science. Taine's doctrine of the artist as the exponent of the *milieu* in which he originated and Brunetière's theory of the *mouvement littéraire* were useful in their day, and what is sound in them has been incorporated into modern scholarship; but they are dangerous notions in the minds of such as like to conceive of literature as operating under natural laws.

It is perhaps time to remind ourselves that the poet is a divine accident. He does not appear as a response to any natural conditions which may be prepared by a cultured and hopeful community. It is to be feared that he does not even come in answer to prayer, though there are few to be found in any age, perhaps, who pray over poetry. When the miracle does occur and the poet comes, he certainly does not adapt himself to his environment. He is usually found to be an Ishmael all his days, a prophet with a lodge in some vast wilderness. Even when he lives among us and shares our daily life and our daily bread, there is a strangeness about him to remind us that he is not of the world. He is anything but an exponent of the community. As well might we speak of a poet as the square root of the average citizen.

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In truth it is possible to make too much of the "literary movement," which explains, adequately enough, all the unimportant features of an author's work, looks into its secondary causes, and investigates its relation to earlier works. The literary movement in a given age is nothing more or less than the record of its fashions, and to them the great author is likely to manifest a certain indifference. While remaining, even to the careless observer, a product of his age, he stands out in contrast to the army of his contemporaries or else becomes himself the head and leader of the new modes, which the lesser men follow obediently and from afar. A group of ardent and determined minor poets, bravely chanting their *internationale* in unison, may serve admirably to initiate or maintain (for a time) a literary movement, but all the enthusiasm and propaganda in the world will not produce a great poet. As Carlyle remarked long since, an age may call loudly enough for its heroic leader, and exhibit all sorts of preparation for him, but yet not find him when they call. "All this I liken to dry dead fuel, waiting for the lightning out of heaven that shall kindle it. . . . The dry mouldering sticks are thought to have called (the great man) forth. They did want him greatly, but as to calling him forth!—"

* * *

When such a great poet does appear, he may exhibit a complete indifference to the literary fashions or he may assume and use them for his own purposes. Chaucer and Shakespeare made such use of the conventions of their day that they became in effect new things. Milton touched the masque only to show its usefulness as a vehicle for high seriousness and profound philosophies of which nobody had ever dreamed it to be susceptible. A new function of the sonnet was, as Wordsworth told us, revealed by Milton:

In his hand
The Thing became a trumpet, whence he blew
Soul-animating strains,—alas, too few!

When he came to the composition of "Paradise Lost," Milton proved himself a reactionary, for he returned to the literature of the ancient world for his inspiration, nor did he again abandon it. There

are no earlier English epics which "account" for his.

As a matter of fact, literary types and fashions are the material upon which the poet works, not the controlling influence upon him. They are for ever awaiting his creative word (*fiat lux*) or his revivifying touch which summons them into new life. Literary types, as the record shows, are more often than not in a languishing state (like the novel at the present moment, which appears to be played out); but it is the office of the poet to revive them. Could there be a more significant record than that of the sonnet, which originally came into existence as a response to the various yet recurrent moods of the love-poet, a function it fulfilled admirably throughout the Elizabethan era, until, as Wordsworth noticed, Milton made it a new thing. Thereafter, except for a few negligible appearances (of interest chiefly to the scholar), the sonnet lay dormant till Bowles, Wordsworth, and the romantics rediscovered it. In the hands of Wordsworth it became again the organ of austere emotion and elevated mood. Nobler patriotic poetry does not exist than the soul-animating strains which Wordsworth blew upon this little instrument. He employed it for many other purposes (alas, too many!), description of nature and ecclesiastical sentiment among them. In the mid-Victorian age, however, the sonnet reverted (so to speak) to type and was found once more specially adapted to the expression, in sequence, of the manifold emotions of the love of man and woman. A number of distinguished sonnet-sequences bespoke its intense popularity among the poets, Rossetti's "House of Life," Christina Rossetti's "Monna Innominata," Mrs. Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese," Meredith's "Modern Love" (which audaciously employs a sixteen-line sonnet of four quatrains), and Wilfred Scawen Blunt's presentation of some of the less regulated emotions in "The Love Sonnets of Proteus," not to speak of lesser sequences or of the many poets who, loving the type, did not happen to link their sonnets into a sequence. And now, in our own day and our own country, the sonnet-sequence proves to be susceptible of yet another development. Mr. William Ellery Leonard (I should call him "Professor," if I were not afraid that he might be shot by Mr. Mencken), has used the sonnet-sequence as a form of *narrative verse*. He has not only carried over the sense from sonnet to sonnet, but the sentence too; and this without departing from the formal construction which has been the convention throughout the history of the type. Of the passion and power of Mr. Leonard's poem, this is not the place to speak. Suffice it to say that it is as novel and as forceful as the type which he employs for its external form.

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As a literary type far less responsive to the ordinary needs of the poet, a type which is perennially perishing yet perennially fascinating to the creative temperament, is the verse-drama, and it has, more than once, by the so potent art of poets, come back into momentary life. Yet the miracle can, it would appear, be wrought but seldom, even by the great. Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Arnold, Browning, and most of the minor poets attempted it with varying degrees of success. Swinburne never recovered from his youthful success with "Atalanta in Calydon," and, in drama after drama, vainly attempted to renew it. Many will recall the pathetic beauty of Mr. Stephen Phillips's verse-dramas a generation ago. But their day was brief, and now oblivion seems to be shutting down over them.

But there is one verse-drama which shows a remarkable tendency to survive. Oblivion shrinks back (perhaps in sheer astonishment) from Mr. Hardy's "Dynasts." Many will recall its first appearance in the year 1904, when it was greeted with shrieks of amazement by professional reviewers and with silent disapproval by the author's friends. Why, oh why, would Mr. Hardy go after strange gods? Why could he not let the poetic drama alone in its grave? Were there to be no more Wessex novels? Was this some subtle punishment that Mr. Hardy was administering to the public for its cruelty to "Jude the Obscure?" Even Max Beerbohm, who reviewed it with all possible consideration was constrained to admit that he did not know why Mr. Hardy wanted to write it. The thing grew. Presently readers realized that there were three volumes of it. It became, as the title-page fearlessly avers, a drama in three parts, nineteen acts, and one hundred and thirty scenes, the time cov-

ered by the action being about ten years. It became clear that the animus that prospective readers of "The Dynasts" experienced was caused by their preconceptions regarding the drama as a type. But here was a *new kind* of drama. Mr. Hardy had chosen to use the verse-drama for an epic purpose, and had himself called the result an "epic-drama." It is not to be confused with plays of the type of "Atalanta in Calydon," "Merope," "Ion," and the rest. If it be destined to live, it must be not as a closet-drama but as a spectacle (the word is Hardy's) of epic proportions and significance, with heroic personages, vast issues, "clash of peoples," supernatural agencies, and, from time to time, scenes of Olympian detachment.

None of the merely imitative closet-dramas of English literature has ever had an aim like that. Even Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound" seems slight compared with it, though Shelley has an intensity of song that we miss in Hardy.

"I suspect," says Mr. Lowes, "that there has never been in English letters, at least since Shakespeare, a genius more essentially pictorial than Thomas Hardy's, and in 'The Dynasts' it is at the culmination of its power. All the pomp and circumstance of courts and chancelleries, all the glory and (depicted with unsparing realism) all the gruesome spectacles of war, all the little human lives in hamlets and on highways drawn without their will into the vortex—all these pass before us in vivid, incredible profusion. . . . As the shifting spectacle unrolls, we are rapt to vast aerial distances, to look down on earth from 'architraves of sunbeam-smitten cloud' with the eyes of passionless or pitying or sardonic Phantoms, whose vision is cosmic, not terrestrial. And not even Swift himself has more relentlessly depicted human littleness."

And now, I should like to ask, what was there in the literary movement of 1904, or the *Zeitgeist* (of which it loved to speak) to account for such a thing as *that*? Resemblances to earlier works of Mr. Hardy may be pointed out, notably to "The Trumpet Major" and "Two on a Tower." The epic holds, to be sure, its place in the long story of Mr. Hardy's artistic growth, but, so far as the trend of contemporary literature and the "*milieu* in which it originated" are concerned, it stands out against them in solitary grandeur.

But there is a positive misfortune resulting from the supremacy and authority of a literary fashion. When the literary movement is in full flow it sweeps into a position of eminence men of lesser ability, whose fidelity in meeting the immediate demands of the public causes them to be acclaimed as men of the first degree of attainment. At this moment the critic makes himself unpopular by specifying defects and counselling moderation. When the literary doctrine changes, and its fashions fall before those of a newer generation, the unfortunate favorite of an earlier epoch is consigned to outer darkness with that scorn and neglect which are always felt for the *passé*. At that moment the critic must risk incurring the contempt of his public by revealing the true, if forgotten, significance of the author, and counselling a mild respect for our immediate forbears. Thus is the critical task committed by the literary movement, quite unawares, to the scholar-critic, the man concerned with permanent issues.

A vivid case in point is the fate that has overtaken the poets of New England who once went by the name of the Concord School. If we fall into the contemporary habit of denunciation, we shall refer, like Mr. Brooks, to Longfellow's "lullabies crooning to sleep the insatiable creative appetites of the soul," and to Lowell's "weak-wing'd song," exalting "the deed." Whittier we shall pass without mention, and Hawthorne with a contemptuous reference to Puritanism. Such a method, to one interested in critical justice, is as preposterous as the exaggerated estimates of half a century ago. Whole sections of the work of these men must of course be consigned to oblivion or, at best, exist in the pale affections of the literary antiquarian; but it is the true function of criticism to remember and restore to esteem that fraction of their work which achieved nobility and serves permanent needs of the human heart. This process, devastating as it would seem to their contemporaries, is but one more example of that winnowing which inevitably ensues upon the disappearance of any school of authors. It is even now at work upon Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, the Rossettis, and their contemporaries. But to assume, with the literary dictators of our own day, that it is a blast which will sweep them all into the Pit, is to be guilty of as great an error as that which would have us exalt everything of our own which may be conceived as expressing the Spirit of today.