

Plight of American Genius

EMERSON AND OTHERS. By VAN WYCK BROOKS. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1927. \$3.

Reviewed by JOHN MACY

AMERICAN criticism of the last twenty years or so has revealed an increasing discontent with American life and with the artistic, chiefly the literary, expression of that life. And criticism itself has had few able exponents. Those few, the thoughtful ones who were not satisfied to beam amiably upon the world about them and the books that came out of it, agreed in their several ways upon two main charges. First, the expression is inadequate to the life that produces it, our literature is, as Mr. Brooks calls it, a "sterile, inferior phenomenon." Second, the conditions of that life strangle and discourage the talent which is born in it and seeks to interpret it. The mechanism of our decivilization, the regimentation, the standardization of our lives, our multitudinous Ford-car regularity, our ready-to-wear opinions are unfavorable to genius or to talent of good quality. The indictment has been brought sharply by Randolph Bourne, by Mr. Brooks, lately by Lewis Mumford, and in a more boisterous, bludgeoning manner by Mencken, who, however, hugely enjoys the scene and the clowns that move upon it.

In this criticism I find one general error—we may differ in a hundred details of the argument. That general error is to make America, and especially America of our time, the solitary culprit. In every country in many periods art has been inadequate and its opportunities have been limited by a hard practical world; it has had to struggle for freedom and only here and there has attained a nearly complete realization of the dreams of the spirit. The worst that can be said against the solitary sinner is that she has sinned a little more weakly than her neighbors and ancestors. And it seems, too, that even while the case is being tried—of course it will never be settled—the culprit is showing remarkable signs of regeneration in which is a touch of healthy defiance. There is no judge in this case. If I were counsel for the defense and not merely a reviewing spectator, I could bring forth a fairly strong array of witnesses in the form of living American writers and artists of all kinds.

Commercialism, mechanism, mass production of things and thoughts are depressing to the spirit and will be until the spirit finds new meanings in them. But these horrible things are not vices of which America is uniquely culpable. The whole world is commercial and machine-made. The other day in the *Times* Mr. George Moore was quoted as despairing of any art in such an age and as escaping in imagination to other centuries and places unspoiled by our kind of civilization. He was speaking of Europe, not of America. I doubt not he is willing to receive the royalties from the American editions of his books which are printed on electric power-presses. Isn't there a good deal of nonsense in this protest of the critical-artistic soul against trade and machinery and physical prosperity? Mr. Brooks asks: "Did it ever occur to Mark Twain that he *could* be honorably poor?" Well, did it ever occur to Mr. Brooks that there was no reason why Mark Twain *should* be honorably poor if he *could* be honorably rich?

And here, before we pursue our general question, I will make a specific criticism of Mr. Brooks. He seems determined in advance to find some antagonism, some maladjustment between America and American writers. As if it were too bad that a genius should be born in America and too bad that America had not more men of genius! It is a curious attitude of mind, at once acutely critical and blindly uncritical. I suspect that he set out to study Emerson in order to find out what was the matter with America and what blighting effect America had on Emerson's soul. Then honestly finding that Emerson was admirably adapted to his environment, flourished in it, Mr. Brooks let Emerson go with six short chapters which he calls "episodes." I do not know that this is what happened to Mr. Brooks, and he may deny it. But some subtle evidence which I cannot clearly detach and quote from the essay itself, added to the evidence of Mr. Brooks's other work, leads me to this perhaps unwarranted conclusion. The episodes, based on Emerson's journals and other writings, are

good as far as they go. They are true Emerson, a skilfully condensed Emerson, but are not more than a partial portrait. For some reason Mr. Brooks seems to have left it unfinished, I suspect (without proof) because he did not find the sinner sitting as uncomfortably as he thought to find him.

An earlier portrait by Mr. Brooks, that of Mark Twain, is finished and it is distorted by a predisposition to find something that was not there. The thesis pulls the facts all out of shape. It is too complicated to argue out here. Briefly, according to Mr. Brooks, Mark Twain was by nature a satirist. But satire did not go in America. Humor did, wherefore Mark Twain, contrary to his nature became the nation's funny man, chastened by a respectable wife, tamed by the timid hand of Howells; his will was thwarted by his environment, his American environment. So short a summary is of course unfair to Mr. Brooks, whose psychological examination of his specimen is subtle and reveals much wisdom in the process. But the subtlety as often mystifies as clarifies. Mark Twain's ordeal was that of any man who lives long in this world and happens to be gifted with a sense of humor and a sense of fact. Satire and humor are not disparate but adjacent and complementary. Mark Twain said almost all that he had to say and was too lazy to say what was left. He was bitter largely because life had hit him hard. And the suppression of that bitterness was largely due to his good sense, like keeping one's temper.

But I am not writing an essay on Mark Twain. I meant only to indicate that the vigorous and really admirable fault of Mr. Brooks is that he bends the facts to his critical will and they will not bend. As Huckleberry Twain would have said, they bust, 'cause they ain't so.

Our age, especially our age, especially in America, is commercial, mechanical, ugly, hostile to art.

If I were an advocate, I should ask the court to strike out "especially." The whole world is commercial and has been commercial for many centuries and has been richest in art in the commercial centers. Physical prosperity is the best condition of art, both for the community in which the artist must live and for the artist as an individual. If a man turn his back on beauty and go after the flesh-pots, the trouble is not the presence of the flesh-pots but the weakness of the man.

I once made a statistical survey of the economic conditions of the leading English men of letters and I found that most of them were fairly prosperous and that many of them were interested in making money. Some did not have to make it because they married it, inherited it, or got it from a patron. Many who did not prosper materially made an effort to prosper. As Stevenson, a devoted and exacting artist said, the first duty of a writer is to support his family. Was Dryden less a poet, less than the first great critic in England, because he always had his eye to the main chance? Pope was rich, Addison was rich. Defoe wanted to be. Swift was sore because he was not. Dickens made money hand over fist. Thackeray was comfortable. Tennyson was rich. Fitzgerald inherited plenty. Browning drove a team of beautiful white horses through the streets of Florence. Later it would have been a Fiat car. The palazzo in which he died is really a pretty little shack.

We all suffer from the economic exactions of life, from the sordid, the ugly, the tawdry, the monotonous. Every age and place have suffered from these things in some form and in some degree. The American form is simply the modern form everywhere; the degree, I believe, is only slightly greater than in older countries. I know I shall be accused of talking like a vulgar patriot. Heaven forbid! Critical discontent is salt and tonic to our porcine lives. I only maintain that the same criticism is applicable everywhere in the world, that an overdose of it is not curative but is itself morbid. And the diagnosis is often wrong, certainly wrong when it takes the form of discovering a nonexistent enmity between industrialism and art, between commercialism and beauty. Our younger critics sometimes remind me of the minister with a fairly ample salary who from the pulpit of a million dollar church deplores the materialism of the age. We are commercial; so were the Venetians. We are industrial; so were the Florentines when they were not engaged in robbery. Samuel Butler said in effect that he did not think America a very favorable place for a genius to be born in. Well, it all depends on the genius.

Mr. Morley Smiles

GOOD THEATRE. By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY. New York: William Edwin Rudge. 1927.

Reviewed by MARY CASS CANFIELD

MR. CHRISTOPHER MORLEY, always versatile and easy, has written an amusing skit entitled "Good Theatre," a little play about plays which, if I remember correctly, first appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature*. It provides a diverting half hour's reading.

The scene is All Hallowe'en in the lobby of a Broadway theatre where the hit of the season, "Your Money or Your Wife," is turning them away. Before the mildly astonished eyes of the box office girl and two male *attachés* of the theatre staff, a couple of gentlemen in Elizabethan costume enter from the rain washed street and request seats for the entertainment. As the house is packed, the tickets are not forthcoming. So, to the tune of roars of laughter rising from the audience at the musical farce within, these strangers talk with the smart young lady and her slick and brilliant henchmen.

Mr. William Shakespeare and Sir Francis Bacon (for although they are merely presented to us as W. and F., we guess their identity) are swiftly pigeonholed by these sophisticates as two Yale men playing hookey from the Hotel Astor fancy dress ball. Thus, with an agreeable mingling of sixteenth century speech and Broadway slang, a conversation on the theatre ensues, in the course of which it develops that the "knock out" playing within, is a modernized version of the Swan of Avon's "As You Like It."

Shakespeare, far from being offended at this vulgarization of his fancy, is entranced by the shouts and loud guffaws which greet it; his nostrils dilate with pleasure as he sniffs the fustian air. He turns to the grave Bacon and exclaims enthusiastically: "Ah, Frank, thou shouldst write plays."

To which the Lord Chancellor retorts: "Tush, these are but toys."

and William later rejoins—

"Nay, Frank, I see thou hast no playhouse heart—" and keenly instructs him in the tricky virtuosity of playwriting—as thus:

How from the moment of first entrance on
To strike them with the sense of some suspension,
Some converse of passion and desire
So that without a guess of what's to come
They feel the onward moving, and are thrilled . . .

. . . get it over
To a stamping, coughing, jostling, stinking pit
Of ragamuffins, grooms, and varletry,
The cut and longtail of the populace—
And still have grace for loftier quiddities
To please the court and gentry . . .
Mark you, the veriest groundling of the lot
Must see himself, his inward hope or grievance,
Active on the scene. Aye, this it is
That makes our stagy antics quick and sheer:
Lo, on the very instant of their doing
They are transmuted to the blood and stuff
Of every hearer; who admires the image
And hugs it as his own, or fashions it
To suit his private fancy . . .

. . . Haply the author,
Like the matron pelican of adage,
Feeds his unsuspecting auditors
From the red artery of his proper breast.

And Bacon answers—

Bravo, Will! Almost persuadest thou me!
Thou art, what's passing rare in playwrights,
Nigh as eloquent as thine own creations.

It is, of course, Mr. Morley's eloquence, his cultivation and insight that emerge from this clever bit of foolery which delights us by its charm, ingeniousness, and high spirits. "Good Theatre" should prove not only agreeable reading, but well suited to presentation in a program of one act plays.

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Inhibitions and Neuroses

FEAR. By JOHN RATHBONE OLIVER. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1927. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GEORGE M. PARKER, M.D.

TWO years ago I was shut below decks in a piece of bad weather with a windy old gentleman from the coast. Why he picked on me I did not know; outside of being low in my mind there was nothing that should have set me off to receive the attentions of a lay reader in the Church of England. I feared an attempt at a conversion. But it was to be less than this. He wanted to assemble in front of me the reasonableness of Divine Healing, as practised in the early church. I was assured the arts of the fathers were finding a place in our age. His friend, the Bishop of Durham, his Grace, the Bishop of London, saw eye to eye with him in this matter. This was his mission and beside it the Insurance of week days seemed trifling if not inconsistent. It was rather hard to break into the disease of the body, to ordain the tissues, so to speak; but the affections of the mind, the great collection of nervous disorders, these were waiting for the new practitioner of the soul.

At about that time I lost count and never thought again of the ancient bellwether until the book called "Fear" came to my hands some time ago. But the old gentleman was right. These two years he has been right; and I have been asleep. "Fear" is by a doctor. He proves a medical man can be an early Christian, and nowhere does his title run more clear than in the free and unrestrained manner of his borrowings and reorienting of facts; the manner which made Rome envied of all later pirates and freebooters. The mixture which ultimately goes into the chalice is amazing. There is rather more of Freud than he knows; then quite a bit of Descartes in the triturate forms of Cannon and Crile; something of Janet, a *soupeon* of Watson, which is plenty, and quite a lot of the strong meat of Group Medicine as it is practised in our states and territories. The author's spiritual heritage is confirmed and unmistakably in the plan, which, in the proper religious spirit, denies a meeting place for discussion and fact. He presents the anxiety neurosis of a middle-aged patient, the product of a lot of vicious instrumentalizings, of bad adjustments and arrangements which hang to the belly of Fear as Ulysses's men hung to the sheep of Cyclops, and for the same reason urged them forward, that they might in some fashion escape into the light. In front of this man the early Christian discusses only Fear, the biological fear of the "primal brute" and how the brute may become man, and then almost God. Which of course has nothing to do with the case as a psychological problem, except that the man is thereby cured. The book tells how the deed was done.



The father of James E. was a two hundred and fifty pound Methodist, and as ardent as he was strong. His mother was born an Irish Catholic only to be adopted by orthodox Jews. After many other privations James came to be a rotarian and a manufacturer whose name and face was blown on the bottle. He married early, had one "extra-marital experience," and then developed a high blood pressure. At about the time an insurance company turned him down for another \$100,000 his troubles began. Within three weeks this go-getter had every symptom which the usual hard working neurotic takes years to acquire. He had phobias, compulsions, conversions, ideas of reference, depression. What would he have done but for his son? Junior was on research at one of our researching universities. Here he had met a man who knew the Great one in medicine. Son came on, having heard that father was on the rocks. There were also rumors of alcohol. One glance denied this and revealed the truth. Taking down a medical Who's Who, he showed father the list of records after the great one's name. Both then took the night train to the east.

Now comes group medicine; examinations, dossiers, and the appearance of the Chief, a judge of the medical Appellate Division, who assigns to father the "Fear Hunter." Stage set includes hospital room, nurses, both vulgar and divine, and occupational therapy, where one must bore holes endlessly until they lie in a straight line. The F.H. does not hide his hand for long. For a short time there is a diary to be kept of thoughts, of admoni-

tions, and of early memories. This is as near the unconscious as we go. Next item: there are no truly religious who have fear. We never meet them in our practice. Fear, then, is a function of irreligion. From here the program runs straight to the soul, except for a break into dentistry, which somehow cuts across the trail for a moment. The *finale* is a meeting with four unofficial apostles who represent respectively, John Bunyan, David who was the Psalmist, impersonated by a Rabbi, Thomas à Kempis, and Book of Common Prayer staged by a militant Prelate. Father recognizes his kind in the last offering and is off to a life of Practice of religion. He is cured; no more alcohol, no more extra-marital. I was going to say, no more life. But that is not fair.

It is indeed only fair to criticize the book as a statement of psychological doctrine. From this angle it is inaccurate and misleading and insufficient. As a system of healing it may have a virtue which a people habituated to diversions of the religious emotion into all sorts of channels could utilize; we are the fundamentalists of the world. Yet it is too bad we can't take our religion straight. The saints surely had carious teeth; locusts and wild honey were not prescribed for blood pressure. And to be godly, because it is healthy—Bring on the Methodist who yells to us to pull for the shore; Lewis proves he has no inhibitions.

Where Life is Brutal

CIRCUS PARADE. By JIM TULLY. Illustrated by WILLIAM GROPPER. New York: Albert and Charles Boni. 1927. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS

HUNGRY, exhausted, verminous, Jim Tully exchanged the life of a hobo for that of a circus roustabout to obtain food, a bed, and immunity from the terrible Mississippi hobo law. This law gives every officer \$2.50 apiece for the vagrants he captures, and thrusts the vagrant into jail a year to pay off his fine of \$75 by hard labor at twenty cents a day. "Buhlieve me, boy," a scared negro put it, "dey sure t'rows de key 'way on you when dey gits you hyeah." Bob Cameron's "World's Greatest Combined Shows"—ten cars—put Tully to caring for the animals under a lithe 200-pound negro who held down the post of lion-tamer. Thus started a year's odyssey through the whole South from Texas and Missouri to Florida. The adventures began with the first week. Striking Beaumont, Texas, and the oil region, Tully saw the big black lion-tamer ripped to death by a savage blind bear. He saw trailers steal the medals from the dead man's coat, and Cameron make \$2,000 from the funeral by advertising it as the great attraction at the next city: "Killed in mortal combat with six huge lions"; "body to lie in state in main tent"; "lion-tamers hurrying from Ringling's and Barnum's circuses to act as pall-bearers" (actually local vagabonds were hired for the job). Then the body was dumped into an unmarked grave.

The "World's Greatest Combined Shows" was a circus in more senses than one; that is, for an observer who, like Tully, did not take its seamy side too seriously. Cameron, blind of one eye, crook-nosed, razor-scarred, of inexhaustible energy, ruled his crew with an iron hand. He was loud, shrewd, illiterate, and tight-fisted. "Money was glue to Cameron." He never paid any employee when he could cheat him or "redlight" him—that is, kick him out of a moving car. He assumed the guise of a broken old man and put up a hard-luck story whenever a town tried to charge him a high license fee; he frightened mayors and tradesmen by the threat that the circus would go stranded on their hands. With him was his common law wife, a scarecrow and virago known as Baby Buzzard, whose philosophy of life was pregnantly concise: "Some people's yellow and some's black and some's Irish. It's all a helluva mess." The principal employees were drug fiends and sexual perverts; some of them were pickpockets and confidence men who gave Cameron twenty per cent of their takings. The short-change expert who acted as ticket-seller and card sharp, Slug Finerty, was a pirate with one eye gouged out, ears pounded to putty, and face cross-hatched with wounds, who had spent five years in a Southern penitentiary. But he was civilized compared with some of his associates. There was "Blackie," for example; "Blackie" shut a negro

girl of fourteen in a canvas wagon, and "stood guard over it while fifteen white circus roughnecks entered one at a time. Before entering, each man gave Blackie a half dollar."

As we should expect of a circus made up of "thieves, liars, and embryo yeggs," traveling in districts where society possessed many vestiges of barbarism, its members witnessed incessant physical clash and peril. Mr. Tully describes a battle with the "rubes" of an Oklahoma oil town, who resorted to knives and clubs when Slug Finerty robbed one of their comrades of eighty cents. They and the circus hands mauled each other beyond recognition; the tents were slashed to ribbons and the wagons smashed; and not until the elephants were driven through the crowds was order restored. He describes a race riot in a Florida Gulf town, started because a negro stepped in front of a white woman in buying his ticket. When the crowd had worked itself into a frenzy it discovered an innocent circus roustabout hiding under a blanket, and dragged him to a kettle of boiling tar. His clothes were torn off. "There were moans as the tar was applied to the heaving body; the nauseating reek of burnt flesh and the odor of tar were everywhere." But the author's most lurid pages are those narrating the final upheaval of civil war in the circus when Cameron tried, at the close of the season, to discharge his men without payment, and "Blackie"—while the blazing tents lit up the forms of men beaten unconscious—took a full and profitable revenge at the hilt of a revolver.



These scenes of blood and violence will be, to some tastes, a little overdone. Mr. Tully varies them with a few chapters which are intended to touch the strings of pathos, and which do give these chords a rough twang. One treats of Lila, the Strong Woman or Female Hercules, who could lift a dozen farmers and storekeepers at one effort. This 400-pound German girl dressed in beribboned frocks and hats, read sentimental romances, dreamed of love in a cottage, and made advances to the top-mounter for the human pyramid act, a dapper little gambler named Anton. By adroit petting Anton induced the "fat heifer" to give him all her savings; and when she discovered that her \$2,000 and her visions of wedded love had both vanished in a night, Lila took poison. A more quietly effective chapter relates how the Moss-Haired Girl, a very decent Swedish woman, who converted her blonde hair into a tangled heap of moss by washing it frequently in stale beer tinted with herbs, had come to step from a convent into a circus. There are humorous episodes also. Legita, the copper-colored dancer, was the heroine of a practical joke repeated at every stop. As the sideshow spieler announced, for the small sum of three dollars from each staring male ("there are no police here, are there, boys?") Legita would give "the wonderful dance *without*; the soul stirring, the voluptuous, the sensuous, the wonderful, the maddening dance *without*." "Shillabers" would speak exultantly of the hot show she put on at the Elks' lodge in a neighboring town. At the appropriate moment, with the money all collected, the rubes were all tricked by a play on words and the sides of the tent instantly dropped, leaving them looking sheepishly at one another and making haste to mingle with the crowd.

It is inaccurate to call the book realism, as the publishers do on the dust-jacket. Actually it is plain that Mr. Tully has heavily retouched his stark and brutal materials, sometimes to enhance their brutality, sometimes to bring out the underlying drama, sometimes to give an effect of pathos. It is a book romantic rather than realistic. Yet although we discount the invented endings he has given some of his episodes, an impression of essential truth remains. Again and again a few rough, incisive strokes bring before us a vivid picture of a man—"Rosebud" Bates, for example, who was at once recognized by his mates as a "fairy" (the word doesn't bear translating); or the rat-faced, domineering Silver Money Dugan, whose specialty was hiring boys with a few hundred dollars' worth of money and clothes, taking this property for safe-keeping, and kicking the youngsters out of the train on night journeys. Mr. Tully is perhaps best in his reproduction of the speech of the circus men. It never lacks flavor. "That man ain't human. He's lower than a skunk's belly," observes one of another. "You're trickier than a louse on a fiddler's head," retorts the latter. The "address" which Bob Cameron makes to the crowd just before his circus opens