

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

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Whirligig Minds

WE know that it is man's power to adapt himself to a changing environment that has made him lord of the continents and king of the animals. He can freeze or roast to a degree without damage, rapid changes in temperature make him more frisky, he can be vegetarian or meat eater, he can drink or abstain, he learns how to live under Oriental despotism and adjusts himself to the herd movements of democracy. Slavish when a slave, he is predatory with the nomads, a dreamer with the sages, a tool user in industrialism, a knight, monk, aesthete, peasant, capitalist, vulgarian, chieftain, or movie star according to circumstance. And in a recent article in *Harper's*, I. A. Richards, Cambridge don and author of a standard work on literary criticism, argues that among all men the American has carried man's adaptability to its peak, and beyond.

It is Mr. Richards' idea that the frontier conditions of American history, and the vast admixture of blood and custom in American immigration, and the high pressure development of American social and economic life, have fostered this power of adaptation until it has become dominant. It is certainly true that what roots the American possesses he has dragged after him from town to town. By middle age his clothes, his accent, his religion, and his diet have all changed, sometimes more than once. You do not ask him where he lives, but where he is living now. He slides through society like an elastic eel.

And so with his opinions. The sudden swings of opinion in the United States which make most elections landslides and produce such violent changes in belief, Mr. Richards ascribes to an excessive adaptability. We were all, one remembers, for the League of Nations in 1918, but after Europe had disappointed us and the Elder Statesmen had crawled out of the dugouts to have their say, we found adaptation to a new point of view easy, and in twelve months were all against the League. Millions of good Baptists and Methodists sat next door to the teaching of evolution until Mr. Bryan made an issue of it, then, presto, the American who had adapted himself to the new tolerance, readapted himself to the new intolerance. We were noted for our adaptability to political experiment, but give experiment a bad name, like Bolshevism, and we pull in our flexible minds with the utmost readiness and adapt ourselves to the idea of being afraid of change until we jump at an alarmist's rattle which Europeans, who have reason to fear Sovietism, would laugh at. And no one has humor enough to shout "banana oil."

Mr. Richards, being an alien and courteous, only hints at some of the more absurd effects of over-adaptability, and concludes his essay with the comforting belief that the new type of man who will succeed in adjusting himself to the accelerating tempo of the industrial age will have to be adaptive to a degree hitherto unprecedented. He thinks that the Americans, having lifted the brakes, are coasting in the right direction even if they do skid and wobble as they dash toward the future.

Unfortunately few of us will see this future in which the nimble mind learns to keep a step ahead of circumstances. One fears that it may never come; and that the excessive elasticity of the modern mind presages a period of immobility, a return to rigidity. The volatile Greeks, ever eager to hear new things, were on the eve of Byzantine fixation,

Landscape with Figures, 1850

By SHAEMAS O'SHEEL

THIS was a time untroubled by too much haste,
When the heart's dear complacencies and pains

Found solace and delight in Autumn lanes,
And the world's wonder was not yet laid waste
By that despairing creed that darkens our day,
That last unwisdom that at last we are wise
And have found out the imposture of the skies
And mocked the soul back into its writhing clay.
No matter. It was but some days ago

When for my love and me, earth as of old
Made a green bed and drenched the air with gold,
And to our leaping pulse opposed her slow
Untired antiphony. And she will sing
Some few days hence to quicken our blood with
Spring.

This Week



"My Early Life." By William II.
Reviewed by *Arthur W. Page*.

"Religion in the Making." Reviewed
by *Ernest Sutherland Bates*.

"The Golden Day." Reviewed by
Lloyd Morris.

"Concerning Women." Reviewed
by *Albert Jay Nock*.

Qwertyuiop.

"Whitman, an Interpretation." Re-
viewed by *Hervey Allen*.

Mulatto. By *Langston Hughes*.

Next Week, or Later

"British Documents on the Origins
of the War." An Analysis; Gen-
eral Introduction, by *James T.*
Shotwell; England, by *Bernadotte*
Schmitt; Austria-Hungary, by
Charles Seymour; Russia, by *Michael*
Florinsky; Germany, by *Sid-*
ney Fay; France, by *Parker T.*
Moon.

and it seems most probable that the young who vibrate to the irresponsible sensationalism of the tabloids, changing opinion so rapidly that they may be said to have no opinion at all, or to be unaware of change, will before they are old seek the placidity of a few facts and fewer ideas often repeated.

Whatever may happen in the future, the present is certainly uncomfortable. Public opinion rules us, and public opinion has become the rapid and quickly changing judgment of the many, who can be made to adapt and readapt by proper stimulus, precisely as certain low organisms can be made to alter by pinching salt into their bowl of water.

It looks as if the General Intelligent Reader, who has had such a good time lately with the new fiction and the new poetry and the new drama, will have to leave for a while the field of art in which he

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Another Man's Poison

By MONTGOMERY BELGION

SOMETIMES an American book, after being a howling cisatlantic success, proves upon publication in London an utter flop. This leads Mr. Mencken from time to time—and perhaps that is why he has been made an honorary member of the International Association of Fire Chiefs—to seek to bring about an international conflagration. English reviewers, he will on such occasions boom in Jovian fury, are a bunch of supercilious bums. Let a good thing be American, and that will be enough for them to refuse to recognize its goodness when they see it. Vainly does Mr. Walpole's clarion trumpet or Mr. Swinnerton's plaintive oboe attempt a counter-theme to the Menckonian bass tuba's. Mr. Mencken has the lungs if not the paunch of Dr. Johnson. The facts cannot be gainsaid, he roars through the tuba, *allegretto e ben marcato*: if Mr. Walpole can cite the titles of American best-sellers which have been in turn as successful in England, then he as easily can name other American works of even greater merit that have been ignored there. For example, "Babbitt," it is true, was acclaimed, but "Main Street" passed unseen.

The facts indeed cannot be gainsaid. Where Mr. Mencken errs is in his diagnosis of the cause. He forgets that if, as he avers, English reviewers really do hold American literature generally in contempt, they will scruple to be as indulgent as possible to individual specimens. A true sense of superiority, he should know well, makes one feel that one should be civil to one's inferiors as a slight compensation for their manifest inferiority. English reviewers then, if truly they felt as Mr. Mencken would have one believe they do, would treat American books with the same punctilious politeness that English peers adopt towards English labor leaders. Thus Mr. Mencken's theory contradicts itself, and some other explanation must be sought.

Such an explanation must at least fit the fact, admitted grudgingly by Mr. Mencken, that at the same time as some American successes are English failures, other American successes are also English successes. It must likewise harmonize with a further observable phenomenon, viz., that occasionally an English book or play well received in England is ignored when it appears in New York. An explanation fulfilling these requirements lies, I submit, in a great verity discovered long before Mr. Mencken, Mr. Walpole, or Mr. Swinnerton alighted on the planet, and formulated in the adage: One man's meat is another man's poison.

Particularly is an American's meat often an Englishman's poison. Take, for instance, the fate accorded on this and that side of the Atlantic to a recent addition to the Today and Tomorrow Series, a volume devoted to making fun of the United States.* In England this little work has had most appreciative reviews; in this country, however, it seems to have attracted little attention. Does this imply a deep-seated conspiracy among American critics against the English literary product? Mr. Mencken would be the first to laugh at the idea. Not so, indeed. This difference in treatment in-

*PLATO'S AMERICAN REPUBLIC. Done out of the original by Douglas Woodruff. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company. 1926. \$1.

stead reflects something perfectly natural. There is nothing very new about the content of Mr. Woodruff's book. As the *London Times Literary Supplement* put it: "Readers will probably enjoy his manner more than his matter." His objects of derision, in brief, are all the old properties: American husbands, the worship of the god Progress, the parking of motor-cars, the magic of large numbers ("I believe myself the American men do not mind dying since it means joining the great majority"), the love of advertising, the mania for speed, the immigration quotas, Prohibition, the "Detroit oracle," card-indexes, and, of course, Rotary. But, if his material is rather worn, he parodies Plato, on the other hand, very amusingly indeed. Now, the English reader, it may be laid down axiomatically, does not mind what a book is about; what matters to him is the way it is done. Hence, in the little volume under consideration, what he fastens on is, not the mocking of Americans, but the mocking of Plato. With the American reader, however, the opposite is the case: style is at most the producer of an unconscious pleasure for him; what he cares for is the food, not the cooking. Now, Mr. Woodruff certainly indulges in some sly digs. That is enough for the average 100 per cent, red-blooded he-man. He will not worry about Plato's misadventure; his own will suffice to make him cast the book aside.

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Contrast such hard treatment with that accorded to a recent American book when it appeared in England. I refer to "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes." This has been ever since its appearance there a favorite topic at innumerable London dinner-tables—the best form of all book-advertising. Supposing it had been an English book, would it have had a similar success here? I take leave to doubt it. Lorelei, you remember, met some decayed English ladies in London. One wanted to sell some sea shells to her. Then she met the first lady's niece. "Don't let my aunt stick you," said this second lady, tactfully adapting her expressions to her auditor; "her sea shells always come apart. Now I have some nice dogs you might like." "Do the dogs come apart, too?" asked Lorelei. Did that incident pain English readers? On the contrary, it convulsed them with laughter. But suppose, I say, an English book were to appear in New York in which the hero, for instance, was a handsome young English marquis who was persecuted in America by obese dowagers, frantically eager to have him, first for their dinner-tables, and then for their daughters. Would New York—would Chicago, Kansas City, Denver, have been convulsed with laughter as London was convulsed at the story of the English ladies who, having fallen on evil days, were trying to turn a dishonest penny? Would they?

It is largely as the result of a like dissimilarity of tastes that, while both "Main Street" and "Babbitt"—which Mr. Mencken expressly named in a controversy some months ago—were best-sellers here, "Babbitt" alone succeeded in England. One reason, of course, why "Babbitt" did better over there than "Main Street" is that "Babbitt" is the better book. If Mr. Mencken will not deem it unkind, one may recall that, whatever he says now, when "Main Street" came out, he wrote that "Winesburg, Ohio" was its superior, whereas on the appearance of "Babbitt" he declared that it was one of the finest American novels ever penned. But artistic merits contribute only in a minor degree to the success of a novel. Again, it is true that "Babbitt" was advertised in England far more lavishly than "Main Street" had been, and further the English edition of "Babbitt" carried a "glossary" of American "terms" which proved extraordinarily amusing to English readers. Yet neither advertising nor a glossary will make a novel go: the cardinal factor is the book's relation to its audience's tastes.

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Let me amplify. What was the secret of "Main Street's" appeal at home? It was that it flattered the superior feeling of a large section of the reading population; all those men and women, that is, who had got out of small towns and settled in the cities. And what was the secret of "Babbitt's" appeal? That it also flattered the superior feelings; every reader imagined that not he but his neighbor was a Babbitt. But in England the situation was very different. While there are no small towns there comparable with American small towns, it is nevertheless true that life in Gopher Prairie

would not seem to an English reader far removed from life in some dingier London suburb. But whereas in America great numbers of people desert the small towns and in the cities grow into quite other beings, the inhabitant of, say, the London suburb of Brixton remains in Brixton, or merely goes to Streatham Hill, which is just the same thing. In short, there is not in England that rapid movement of great chunks of the population from one class to another which is always going on in America. Hence "Main Street" could flatter no one in England. "Babbitt," on the other hand, was just as flattering to any Englishman or Englishwoman as to those Americans who most enjoyed it. For the Englishman or the Englishwoman, George F. was just an American, and he or she thanked God devoutly that he or she had been born English.

Or take a couple of more recent examples. Two big American successes locally have been John Erskine's "The Private Life of Helen of Troy"—since admirably followed up by his "Galahad"—and George A. Dorsey's "Why We Behave Like Human Beings." In England "The Private Life of Helen of Troy" has been relatively as popular as in America, but "Why We Behave Like Human Beings" has passed unnoticed or has been reviewed like this (I quote *in extenso* the *Manchester Guardian*):

We must be excused a quotation from Messrs. Harper Brothers: "On the treacherous problems of love, fear, hate, nerves, glands, thought, civilization, evolution, progress, marriage, race, bacteria, heredity, psycho-pathology, death, and disease, this book sheds a revealing light. To the questions who is man, why is man, and what is man, it gives as complete an answer as is today possible." In four hundred and eighty-four pages and all for 12s. 6d. Great is America and worthy to be praised. Probably we shall have done our duty by this unique volume when we record that it is full of pep and has a punch in it. It is readable to an amazing degree. Not one of these treacherous problems but is attacked and resolved in language and argument which makes no more demand on the reader than does an easy chair. It is a colossus of snippets, each entirely adequate to the occasion, entirely satisfying to the questioner who questions but never argues. And withal it is written in so breezy an American that the shyest inquirer will not feel sensitive and the least educated will feel at home. Here is knowledge for all with a vengeance. At the four hundred and eighty-fourth page the meaning of the universe has been finally explored, and the eternal purpose lies exposed. Ho, everyone that thirsteth. . . .

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Now, although Messrs. Harper in London quoted this review in full in their advertisements, it is not really a eulogistic review. One wonders, indeed, if Messrs. Harper in London have heard of irony, that form of utterance which postulates a double audience, "consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsiders' incomprehension?" Because they, in this instance, are, I am afraid, the outsiders. For we are in the presence of more than the question of the merits of an individual book. It may be said that we are face to face with the difference between two national outlooks upon the field of knowledge. In other words, while in America "The Private Life of Helen of Troy" was no doubt read by many who wanted to find out about Helen, and "Why We Behave Like Human Beings" was read by many who really wanted to know why, in England "The Private Life of Helen of Troy" was read only by those who already knew all about her and wanted to see what liberties Mr. Erskine had taken, what fancies he had woven, and "Why We Behave Like Human Beings" was read by nobody at all, or by so few as to be negligible in comparison with its American audience.

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The American and English attitudes to knowledge, in fact, may be said to differ in this way. In both countries it is held that knowledge should be accessible to all, but whereas in England it is also held that such knowledge is of value only if it is accurate, and that, to be accurate, it must be acquired by diligent effort, it seems to be held in America—but I let Mr. Woodruff speak: "In nothing are the Americans," declares his Socrates, "more hurried than in the pursuit of wisdom and truth. Most of them do not join in the pursuit at all, saying that they have no time to spare from the pursuit of wealth, but some will give twenty minutes in a week." Again: "The Americans think it finer to give a smattering of information to everybody than to give education to a few." And yet further: "The student hurries from course to course and becomes acquainted with the preliminaries of many

studies, but is advanced in none." Finally: "The women think they know something when in fact they know nothing, but the men are not even aware that there is anything to know."

Granted that these dicta have an element of the grotesque, there is nevertheless, it will be admitted, a grain of truth in them. Only in America, among all countries that have ever known the blessings of civilization, has culture been "sold" to the whole public, with the result that the culture-hounds are really the sold. Only in America will one hear a man say that he ought to know "Why We Behave Like Human Beings" or that he wants to know "The Story of Philosophy," but that he "has never had the time to get around to it." In America there is, in fact, a strong desire for knowledge among those who lack the apparatus with which to gain accurate knowledge. But in England the same sort of people are—perhaps wisely—incurious; they are satisfied with gardening or watching football, backing horses, or reading novels which they do not buy, but borrow from a circulating library. It is on this account that while in America such works as "Why We Behave Like Human Beings" are reviewed favorably and seriously by reviewers who bear in mind that "all men are created equal," in England such works tend to get ironical receptions from reviewers who are irremediably convinced that men are far from being all equal and that they themselves, in particular, are much superior to their fellows.

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An English writer suggested the other day that one reason why so many of his countrymen never read and yet at the same time find that their literature means so much to them is that the English, whom the French call hypocritical, "have really the gift of genuineness in rather a peculiar degree." That smacks a little of the English public-school Pharisee, but it is worth ruminating.

With that enough, surely, has been said to dispose of the theory that English reviewers are hostile on principle to individual American books and to establish instead the fact of the diversity of national tastes in America and England, a diversity which alone is responsible for the variety of receptions accorded to books in the two countries. One may add, though, that, far from wishing to belittle American literature, English critics are going out of their way to praise the American product. In reviewing "An American Tragedy," for instance, Mr. Edwin Muir, the author of "Transitions," wrote recently that it has a style "full of character," a style that "says pretty much what the author wishes it to say." And Mr. Arnold Bennett has declared that the two most important novels he read during 1926 were "An American Tragedy" and Melville's "Pierre." "And note," he added, "that both are American," concealing amid his pro-American enthusiasm that "Pierre" was not a product of 1926 but of the eighteen-fifties. Could one be kinder?

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was beginning to get some very interesting ideas (not all favorable to novelty) and take up history, science, sociology, and most of all philosophy. If we are to have a howl every month or so about the tyrannical actions of Mexico, some of us will have to read upon Mexico in a source more reliable than political manifesto or inspired journalism. (In *belles lettres* one might suggest D. H. Lawrence's "The Plumed Serpent," which is illuminating if not precisely history.) If the general unintelligent reader is going to form his opinions of science from the headlines, some less readily adaptive persons must try to discover what really is known about Bible criticism, psychoanalysis, animal descent, and the function of scientific thought. If Europe, in spite of the Senate's belief that nothing east of the Prohibition line concerns us, persists in asserting that we have eaten the cake and are asking for more, why intelligent readers must know more about economics and the philosophy of history than politicians and most editors dare to display.

In short, the double-jointed adaptability of the American populace is such a menace to anything like clear thinking or determined action that some of us must stop adapting long enough to discover what we really know and think. Otherwise we can expect no more stability in public opinion than in a girls' school or a herd of sheep.