

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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### America

IF energy alone could make a civilization, America would lead the world in culture. Some American short stories and novels are so energetic that it wearies a tired man to read them. They are high-pressure, double-charged interest getters, taking any hill on high gear, with interchangeable parts and a moneyback guarantee attached by the publishers.

The hacks who write these stories are more energetic than French and British hacks, just as American bankers and salesmen are more energetic than their competitors abroad. The country that produces them is boiling with energy. Indeed the hack writers of a generation are a good measure of its literary vitality; when literature is booming, they boom too; the spacious days of Queen Elizabeth let their suns go down on innumerable hacks of talent and the Augustan Age invented Grub Street. Our journalists, novelists, feature writers, short-story writers, live with a punch and write with a punch. Poets write more verse here than elsewhere, just as California trees bear more fruit. More plays are produced annually in New York than in any two cities of the Old World.

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Energy is characteristic of whatever deserves the name of literature in America. Our serious fiction buds and branches like rank growth in Spring, and every kind of story is being tried, from the most archaic to the most modern. The French inventions are few in number and it is easy to see where the British are weak and where they are strong, but there is not a possibility for fiction where Americans are not failing or succeeding, or both. There is no common denominator for "The Plutocrat," "Death Comes for the Archbishop," "Elmer Gantry," "Manhattan Transfer," and the stories of Ring Lardner, except energy.

We have energy to sell and need borrow none from abroad, where indeed it is notably lacking, especially among the younger writers. It is not a time for borrowing anything from Europe except those moving ideas which must always sweep backward and forward across the seas. Fastidious imitations of English urbanity or French phrase are the pallid streaks in American literature, and the only really successful imitator of the British style of social writing is Sinclair Lewis, whose adaptation of the Wellsian novel is so powerful that everyone, including himself, forgets where it came from. The Gallicized intellectuals who try to play with their scene as Gide and Cocteau are playing with France, are more fragile than their originals; and that post-war philosophy of disillusionment in which nothing has more than a relative importance and mere sensation shines with a febrile glimmer against a dark background of incoherence, simply will not export to America. Books that carry it here are, with very few exceptions, academic exercises in the expression of despair. The idea of life as an illusion of the senses with no governing principle grows feeble and literary when it encounters the rushing, roaring energy of America. It may be true, but it does not seem true, where so much is doing.

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Our young writers are going to Paris and London, especially Paris, now as never before. They will find nothing being written there more vital than what we are producing here. They will find less inventiveness in technique, a narrower range of literary subjects, and in style precisely those results of a long and homogeneous culture which it is most dangerous for an outsider to imitate. The great

### Descent

By WITTER BYNNER

WE have come along a trail of blood,  
And here we are.  
We sit on our civilized haunches  
And gaze at a star.  
We apply our hands to a lever  
And turn on the force  
And finally murder a neighbor  
Of course.

### This Week



"Understanding America." Reviewed by *Ralph Barton Perry*.  
"The Women at Point Sur." Reviewed by *Herbert Gorman*.  
"Zelda Marsh." Reviewed by *Ernest Sutherland Bates*.  
"God Got One Vote." Reviewed by *Elmer Davis*.  
"Balbus." Reviewed by *Amabel Williams-Ellis*.  
"Jean Paul Marat." Reviewed by *John M. S. Allison*.  
Wilfrid Gibson's Collected Poems. Reviewed by *William S. Johnson*.  
"A Book of Shanties." Reviewed by *Joanna C. Colcord*.

### Next Week, or Later

With the issue of October 1 the *Saturday Review of Literature* will begin a new department, The Children's Bookshop, intended for parents.

It will also run the first of a series of twelve essays by the Editor, Henry Seidel Canby, on important new books.

scientific, social, and philosophic ideas of post-War Europe reach Ann Arbor or San Francisco more rapidly than the stranger in the cafés and studios of Paris. Indeed, relativity, the cyclism of history, economic internationalism have scarcely touched contemporary French and British literature, which is a closet affair. Einstein is likely to mean more to an American in New York than when he is in Grenoble, Chelsea, the Rive Gauche, or Oxford.

But if we cannot learn style we may learn much from abroad about the meaning of a good life and all that is implied thereby. We may adjust our sense of values which at present is knocked askew by the cost of living and the prestige of financial success. The problem is not to learn how to write like a European, but to learn how *not* to write like the stereotypes of the million-circulation American magazines. The young American has everything—energy, a great market rapidly extending into Europe, a new self-confidence, a vastly interesting scene, the richest, the most varied, and most mobile since the Renaissance, a country prolific in character types, a nation diverse yet so unified in custom and

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### Publicity

(An Epistle to Alexander Pope, Esq., on Rereading His Stories and Moral Essays)

By LEE WILSON DODD

AWAKE, my Alexander! where you lie  
Snug in Elysium; put your poppies by;  
Shake off Eternity's soft indolence,  
But O! inspire me with your infinite sense.  
The times are out of joint, they always are;  
Rages, as in your day it raged, the Star:  
Named of the Dog, it maddens! past a doubt  
Hell's Psychiatric Clinic is let out.  
Our Wits now swarm from Bedlam, and our Wise  
Stare on each other with a wild surmise,  
While furious Propaganda, with her brand,  
Fires the dry prairies of our wide Waste Land;  
Making the Earth, Man's temporal station, be  
One stinking altar to Publicity.  
Touts from the house-tops bawl their wares abroad,  
From Sex to Service, Cigarettes to God;  
These bang the drum and those the cymbals clash  
For Righteousness and Comfort, Christ and Cash;  
While, crowding through dull booths for trade designed,  
All dead to Shame, and moribund to Mind,  
Science and Art turn mountebanks and shriek  
"This way for Beauty! Truth is cheap this week!"

What ails the world, my Alexander, say!  
Slumber no more in listless holiday.  
Fly to one poet's aid whose stammering pen  
Would emulate your poise and point again.  
Mark our pert manners, morals, and one loss  
That dulls the sun and dwindles gold to dross,  
Our lack of civilized humility:  
For, sure, God laughs when fishes scorn the Sea.  
Yet Man, mad Reasoner, reasons Mind to nought  
And, curs'd with wordy arrogance of thought,  
O'erlooks a small, still flame within his breast  
Whose wordless beauty makes God manifest.

Quick, then! your rapier-quill, your fencer's writ  
Your magic ink, vitriol and amethyst!  
And lend me, last, one-tenth your art to mend  
My cloudy verse, clear guide, philosopher, a friend.

Small was your close-till'd garden, 'twas "Town,"  
Where mind touched mind, and who was up, w down,  
Known unto each, made London a neat page,  
Clear printed, legible: from Court to Stage,  
From Wills to Whitehall, from the Change to K.  
Nothing was won or wasted but all knew.  
Thus, in reducing mirror, you could scan  
What seemed a Universe of simplest plan,  
And vindicate the ways of God to Man.  
But now our Town's the Planet; there's no left  
Left to epitomize the human race.  
London's a chaos and New York a swirl:  
Who gibes at Crooked as you gibed at Curl,  
Certain that all who read the name must smile  
With swift acceptance of his craft, your guil  
Where none is ever silent, no one's heard;  
Where most are frantic, all appear absurd.  
Itching Publicity defeats its aim,  
For who's conspicuous where all  
Thus Peacock, Rat, and Rabbit  
Wail "LOOK AT ME!" and va

We have lost much for satire to  
Kings, courtiers, fatuous patron.

The little gilded circles of the Great,  
Born into power and eminent by Fate.  
A capful of aristocrats in lace  
No longer hide the keys of Fame and Place:  
Now, faith! we are ruled by men who feign to be  
The loyal lackeys of Democracy;  
Who execute the Will of All (they say),  
But mulct and manage us the same old way.  
For cold and avaricious men are still  
The People's masters, and we do their will:  
While, oft, th' elected Figureheads of State  
Serve but as clowns and mummers till, too late,  
Turning our eyes a moment from the Show,  
We see our wallets and our watches go  
(Whither no watch or wallet e'er returns)  
Into some Bandit-Banker's smoking urns.  
There, mixed with Oil and Brass, our scrapings fall  
Into a magic Fund, named Capital,  
Controlled by Few, and those not always known,  
The Master-Guardians of Lord Mammon's Throne.

Not, mark you, that I deem our fate unjust,  
For Indolence is lawful prey to Lust.  
Only through lust of power our Masters dree  
The pains, to win the prize, of mastery.  
Sad prize, methinks! nor worth the nauseous fight.  
And yet you sang, *WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT*:  
Provoking thus, no doubt, the Cynic's song  
(*WHATEVER IS, OR IS TO BE, IS WRONG*)  
Drowning my milder music, who would go  
Only so far, *WHATEVER IS, IS SO*.

Meanwhile this Planet-Town raves on, unchecked,  
And who's to be th' Angelic Architect  
Shall mould its chaos to a firm design  
And crown the Future with his living line,  
You who are nearer to the Source may guess;  
But I'm nor Pope nor Prophet, I confess.  
I can but note the surface of the Play:  
What Armies enter, and what march away;  
What Rascals triumph and what Heroes fall;  
What gods they worship, or no God at all.  
Lo, by yon Altar, crawling crowds who press  
Forward to kiss the heelmarks of Success;  
Yonder, uncounted forms, each with his Glass,  
Kneel to transformed reflections, Ass by Ass.  
Or those, or these, do I the more applaud  
For modern Piety, who drool and nod  
To Self or to Success, our Male and Female God?

pace to all such! But others I would slay  
To make an Alexandrian holiday.  
Our brethren of the Cloth, who dare not look  
Yond the covers of one ancient Book,  
St Hebrew folklore, jeopardized thereby,  
Meet with a poisonous fact or two, and die.  
Our younger brethren of the Cloth, who use  
Outworn jargon when they face their pews,  
Rich, elsewhere, their superior smiles reject;  
D, when abroad; in Church, more circumspect;  
Mi-Tartuffes, who reinterpret all  
Our sacred rites; conduct a funeral,  
Or give Communion, with immense  
(at private) doses of Pickwickian sense.  
Consider Guff, Jehovah's base buffoon:  
A live Fundamentalist! From moon to moon  
Bays of Sin, Damnation, and the Pit,  
Singing his Shaman howls with infra-Shavian wit;  
Then agitates for LAWS, and ever MORE,  
To banish Freedom and make Love a whore;  
Or Fluff, comedian of a subtler stripe,  
Whispers that Fundamentalism's tripe;  
Then, beaming through the lilies, Easter Day,  
Sings, "Our Redeemer liveth! Let us pray."  
On one dogma Guff and Fluff agree,  
To operate zealots for Publicity;  
To count that Sabbath lost whose setting sun  
No Front-Page Campaign for Fluff and Guff  
Began.

Scholarship, nor Science, may I spare.  
It was, the dedicated Scholar's care  
To be faultless in his sensitive task;  
Fame did he pursue, nor Comfort ask;  
His anchorite, too proud to imitate  
The ambitions of the Rich, the Great,  
And as Milton or Erasmus wrought,  
To transcendental goals of thought;  
To duos skill to ply  
The Task-Master's eye.  
Why schoolboy now may smile  
In Milton's style,  
To an cosmogony!  
Perfection is life's key,

Stamped, filed, and polished by the patient Soul  
To open Wisdom's door and then control.  
'Tis through self-mastery the tolerant Wise  
(How obvious is God's truth, which fools despise!)  
Act *well* their chosen part—"there all the honor lies."

There all the honor lies, but not th' acclaim  
Of ignorant multitudes, which men call Fame.  
There all the honor lies, but profits lurk  
Rather in self-laudation than good work.  
The Scholar, now, the Scientist, both vie  
With Sheiks and Vampires for the public eye,  
With Pugilists and Columnists, 'tis clear,  
For the monopoly of the public ear.  
Once timid in dim corners, like the mouse,  
Professors now, like actors, "count the house,"  
"Take stage," demand a "spot," inspire a "clack,"  
And, to "get laughs," will sit upon a tack,  
Or do a "prat fall" with the veriest clown  
To gain th' attention of our Planet-Town.  
For Dr. Blah a bold hypothesis  
Proclaimed abroad is Apotheosis;  
To startle, or to thrill, is all his care,  
Wherefore he keeps and grooms a nesting mare,  
Forth from whose addled eggs great Marvels, sure,  
Burst into Print! Hoop la! a Cancer Cure!  
Proves Ectoplasm an Etheric Wave!  
Finds a live Pterodactyl in a Cave!  
Communicates with Saturn! Changes Rat  
From Male to Female! Educates a Cat!  
Perfects Atomic Motor! Turns pure Silk  
To Radium! Conquers Death with Turtles' Milk!  
Or, in another vein: Psychologist  
Says Paranoiacs never have been kiss'd!  
Or, W——n demonstrates that human thought is  
But a contraction of the Epiglottis!  
Or, Herr Direktor Lästigkeit is sure  
Sex-perverts only write good Literature!  
Such are the grave pronouncements of our Wise,  
And in such verbiage all their honor—*lies*.

Nor do our *Literati* lag behind  
In loud laryngeal fits of mindless Mind.  
Seizing on wind-pipe speculations, they  
Collect Thought's tatters to trick out a play,  
To crazy-patch a novel, or rehearse  
Asylum-eccentricities in verse.  
Lo, the poor Indian, Gertrude Stein! whose brain  
Tangled in echolalia writhes in vain;  
Joyce, in whose babble-jargoning is heard  
Old Night's obscene and "uncreating word,"  
Almost persuading Sherwood Anderson  
Libido's ultimate Freedom has begun!  
Libido, land-locked in her muddy scow,  
Sex at the helm and Mammon at the prow,  
Dull procuress to Dollars, bawd to Wit—  
(If this be treason, make—Freudians—the most of  
it!)

Meanwhile, our Critics and our Highbrows vie  
In proving Life is worthless, Love a lie,  
All Aspiration a mechanic thrust  
Toward power, an eddy of the soulless dust;  
All Goodness but desire inhibited,  
And Death a meaningless satire on the dead.  
Man's a contraption, they assert, who came  
To consciousness by accident, whose flame  
Is but a spark struck from the flinty breast  
Of Nature by the friction of unrest:  
A spark, 'tis true, that knows itself to be  
A spark—yet quails before mortality;  
A foolish spark, whose self-awareness gains  
It nothing but illusion, passing pains,  
More transient pleasures, throe or throb or trance,  
Amid th' electrons unintentioned dance.  
Thus is the Mind by its own maggots soiled,  
Whose only virtue now's to be "hard-boiled,"  
Tough-fibred, fatuous, cynically pert,  
Unwarm'd by sunshine, undismay'd by dirt,  
Stolid toward beauty and anaesthetized  
To all that Socrates or Plato prized,  
To all Isaiah dreamed of, Jesus knew,  
To all th' ineffable bloom of life, the dew  
Upon hope's rose, the lustre, the pure gleam  
Of spirit caught from Spirit, streams from Stream.

No, no, my Alexander, do not wake!  
Drowse on untroubled for Elysium's sake!  
'Twould mar your rest, and others' rest, to gain  
A bird's-eye prospect of our World's sick brain.  
Nay, do not cloud one dream of Lamb's, nor fret  
Montaigne!  
Let not our aberrations jog Voltaire,

Or rouse deep Rabelais from his easy chair;  
Shock from long slumber Lucian, or perchance  
Spoil the first naps of Butler or of France:  
All mockers of false gods, who loved the True,  
As all who labor for perfection do:  
Yea, mocking, they revered the mystery  
Of Mind, its ardor and integrity,  
Its fine discriminations and far sweep,  
As Atom thrills to Atom, Deep to Deep.

## The American Malady

UNDERSTANDING AMERICA. By LANGDON MITCHELL. New York: George H. Doran Company. 1927. \$3.

Reviewed by RALPH BARTON PERRY  
Harvard University

IT is hard to speak anything but good of this book, or perhaps one should say, of the author as his book reveals him. When any of his virtues gives out, there is always some other to stop the breach. He is often wise, but when he is not, he is amusing, and when he is either of these, or neither, he is genial. This last is perhaps his greatest virtue. For America is in great need at present of genial critics. There is not much point in criticizing people if they hate you for it, or if, having read you once they resolve never to do so again; or if you so antagonize them that they firmly resolve never, if they know it, to agree with you. Stuart Sherman being so disastrously and prematurely lost to American criticism, there is the greater need of Langdon Mitchell. For he can do what Stuart Sherman did, and what so few can do,—he can make the plain truths palatable and the old-fashioned goodness new.

The basic element in the composition of the genial critic is probity. He would rather be right than witty, and then, being right, is happily also witty. But conjoined with this element there must be scholarship, that ripe acquaintance with the past, that sympathetic penetration to the inwardness of things, of which tolerance and humanity are the inevitable effects and the surest symptoms. Langdon Mitchell is a traditionalist,—of a sort. He speaks well of Christian-American institutions and commends a patriotic devotion to them, not from partisan zeal, but from understanding. His traditionalism is tempered with qualities of universality and humility that open the mind to the present, and conciliate opponents. He is an urbane provincial, an American to whom it is neither incredible nor intolerable that there should also be other and non-American things in the world.

Much of what passes as criticism in America today is a tedious abuse of something called "Puritanism," having neither the historical understanding nor the disinterestedness which even satire requires. If there be any animus in the author of the present volume, it is a distortion produced by this present current of feeling. He is evidently fair to Puritanism, but is disposed to exaggerate its effects. The core of the book is the diagnosis of "The American Malady." The malady consists not in America's racial inheritance, or political institutions, or national heroes, because, as the author wisely observes, "the virtues and values of a people do not constitute their weakness." The centre of the trouble is a boredom, produced by the lack of a true conception of the "good life." Americans do not understand that the love of nature and poetry and music express the deeper needs of human nature, and that there can be no human contentment unless these needs are satisfied. There is a sordid and dyspeptic quality in American life, a lack of graciousness and joy.

Granting the at least partial truth of this description, what is the cause? The author is disposed, in common with so many of his contemporaries, to find the indictment against the ascetic and iconoclastic influence of Puritanism. Surely Puritanism is not guiltless in the matter. But unless we are to accept the over-subtle dialectics of Freudianism how are we to account in terms of Puritanism for the flagrant failures of anti-Puritanism? Are pictographic journalism, reckless automobilism, hectic athleticism, and atavistic jazzism to be laid at the door of Puritanism? And what are we to make of the fact that the dreariness and vacancy which the author so deprecates are most characteristic, not of the heroic days when Puritans abounded, but of these ultra-modern days in which it is the fashion to despise them?

The fact is a much more complicated matter. America's vulgarism is due, among other things,