

The Côte d'Or

IF you look out in time, Dijon is a name on a railway station to be seen in France when you are going somewhere else. The first time I noticed it was at three in the morning, in January, 1914, when an abrupt jolting wakened me, and I was curious to learn how much nearer we were to Switzerland. Dijon then was but a group of French soldiers in cherry-colored bloomers under a dim lamp; then our train moved on. Dijon was of no significance.

The next time I was there we were kept in Dijon Station a long time. Our train was on its way to Paris, and was itself crowded with soldiers—for now it was early in the September of 1914—some with wounds which were evidently gangrenous; and if they were not wounded men then they were weary fellows, in bloomers not so cherry-colored as formerly, who were in no mood to talk of war, who had been fighting for weeks, and had been ordered, just as they were, to another battlefield. Some of us were twenty-four hours standing in a corridor of that train, in a smell I got to know rather better later on.

And this autumn, traveling in France again, I was reading a book, and had got to a point in it where its authors was assuring me that it is "impossible for a pacifist to write history," when my train slowed, and stopped, with a familiar jolt. Dijon! This time it was my destination.

Well, whether it is impossible for an agnostic to write fiction, or a Buddhist to write philosophy, or a Christian to write poetry, or a man who is all for peace to write history, are doubts I do not care to resolve; yet I did feel for a few minutes there in Dijon again—though merely as a man who sometimes thinks that peace has a few good points—that history is far from easy to write. How could one get it all in? How could one be as impersonal and as just as a seraph who had to report to the Ineffable? It was foolish, of course, to glance along Dijon's platform for the group of soldiers once seen there under a dim lamp wearing a uniform now forgotten; yet somehow the men of the war who are less than nameless, who might never have been more than shadows which became one with night when their day had set, were more real to me than all the activity in that railway station of the present.

Impossible for some of us to write history? I should say it is. One had better call history the least satisfactory department of biology, and leave it to anybody who is confident he knows a fact when he sees one. It is no good going for facts to the sentimental who ponder what is invisible; they may confuse things. The trouble for such writers, if they attempt history, is that they will see humanity as men and women, and so stand in danger of getting hopelessly lost. You may write anything you please about the myth called humanity, and you are safe from mockery, because generalities concerning a myth are never funny; but once you begin on Tom, Dick, and Harry, you had better be careful. Those fellows wore trousers, and fell in love, had children, and on the day they were "called up" they went out to lonely corners to think it over. For them war meant separation, ruin, and the end, by all the odds. It was not a generality which only affected an abstraction called humanity. And we happen to remember a few of those fellows. How can they be omitted from history when history is nothing without them?

I don't know. But they are omitted. So history, to some of us, be it as august and wise as is possible while forgetful of the inhabitants of Dumdrum, is nothing; it is addressed to the reason and never to the bowels. It belongs to anthropology, that most romantically speculative subject, which changes its centre of interest with each psychological fashion, that is, once a year. Nevertheless, I am bound to confess that recently the ticket collector at Dijon station stood not in the autumn of 1914; he demanded a valid voucher, which I had taken the precaution to bring with me. That was lucky, for by the look of him I am sure that Frenchman knew nothing of a Dijon I could see. It was not on the map, much less on the line of the P. L. M.; so he allowed me to go in and out of another Dijon station just as I

pleased; everybody's ticket for that place had been given up long ago, I suppose.

Then there was a lengthy automobile drive, in the Côte d'Or, towards a sunset of the autumn of this year. I suppose the French will never believe it of the English—for the French are given to logic and the English to sentiment—but there are many of us to whom much of France is the same as home. We passed that evening a hill on which stood one battlemented wall of an old castle; the rest of the castle was rubble and thicket. That was where in 1423 the Duke of Bedford—before Joan of Arc made him feel a bit less ducal—married Anne of Burgundy. Of course, I don't mean such monuments as that; not anything of such historical note. But when day had nearly gone we passed the side of a common village home, a pale wall with an exclamation on it: *Byrrh!* You will know how I felt about it if ever you have been checked by an exploding shell when crawling amid ruins, and have looked up to see that heartfelt word confronting you on the only wall left upright in a French hamlet. Besides, the Côte d'Or is, geologically, a Dorset on a bolder plan; the hillsides which give us the best



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wine there is have the forms of those noble downs you see in the unfrequented England between Lulworth Cove northwest to Lyme Regis, and are made of similar rocks. Those limestones have the seal of an ammonite as a guarantee of their quality, and they weather as buff and greys which shine, when they are waterworn, with the rich softness of nard; they tell you at a glance that this earth is ample and generous. When writing history, how is it all to be got in?

Then our car swerved into a hollow where the night seemed thicker in patches—probably another village—and came to a stand by a shallow terrace above which was a large door with one small lamp. The oil lamp was humble, it was too feeble to make much of the hall within; the night kept close around us. There was a smell of a wood fire. A broad staircase of stone went up from the hall, apparently to the stars. It rested on darkness round a bend. A few old portraits seemed on the point of emerging from the gloom, at our entrance, but hesitated on the verge of distinction, perhaps shy of modern interlopers.

We were welcomed by an American and his lady. It was their house, though built before a revolution that was none of their business; not their revolution. I held a candle up to one portrait; a shrewd and bearded face screwed its eyes down at me. The candlelight shone on a steel corslet. Messire François de la Plume! Seigneur there in 1580. The American in his tweeds gazed at François in his steel; but this little history is unable to record whatever may have passed between them, though I know it would be highly interesting to learn. Philadelphia now; but once it was François

de la Plume, who was military governor of the fortress of Semur when Henri III was king of France, and Drake, on the English side, was just back from Ternate, and the Spanish Armada was getting into being. Besides, the son of these Americans flew for France in the last war, and long before his countrymen were in it, I fancy. So as for history, it seemed to me like that staircase, the bottom steps of which were obviously substantial, but they neared us out of impenetrable shadows from round a corner of night; you might think you could guess what was out of sight, but most likely the guess would be oddly wrong.

It has been my lot to get accustomed to several French chateaux, whether or not I liked their circumstances, but here for the first time my bed was provided with a canopy of crimson brocade fifteen feet high. Peace was in this house. I did not in the silence of this French house listen to distant guns, the mutterings of Ypres. In the outer dark now there was but the reminiscent voices of owls; and it was strange that the rapid evolutions of a bat, who was confused by my candle, should have been quite noiseless. The room was so large that after the bat had passed through the candle's utmost effort he was gone; the transits of the bat were swift, intermittent, and baffling. His shadow would pass over my history book like a hieroglyphic too brief in any case for deciphering; no easier to understand than the muttering of Ypres in the night.

I will not say it is possible for a pacifist to write history, because that kind of man, like a pro-German, or a pro-Boer, an English baron, or a hundred-per-cent American, might be anything, even a rascal. He might write anything; he might pretend to be an ancestral voice prophesying war, at the right price. But in the morning I did wonder, looking from my window—which was above a moat where a shoal of carp were playing follow-my-leader over a stick—to where in a meadow under the Burgundy hills and the sun a herd of white cattle were grazing, whether any book worth the name can be done except by a mind at peace. I felt then that poetry, at least, is not likely to be given to those whose minds are at war with this or that. Perchance peace is not the absence of war, a mere certainty that for the present the ships and the railway trains continue on their schedules. The state of peace, perhaps, is but a personal matter, and for those who can attain to it the guns, should they go off, and the authority of the pro-consul's guard, do not count. I wondered, that morning, whether without the harmony which only a mind sure of its centre can bestow upon the perplexing prospects of earth, we are as likely to find great art justifying our cities as we are to chance upon Apollo managing a glue factory. In spite of Ruskin's assurance of the poetic inspiration of conflict, in which he is supported by the truculent critics of our own day who would have us believe that the real right fellows are as curly-fronted bulls, lords of the cows and the ranges, I doubt that our latter-day democratic need for gas-masks will move us in the way the builders of the Gothic cathedrals and the great musicians were moved. We greatly desire great art to arise in our cities. We desire, in fact, to have things both ways; to retain our glue-factory when it is so profitable, and with the glue we want the flashing of the wheels of the chariot of the sun. We would look up from the clangor of our prosperous industrialism, in which we desperately hope to find peace and security, and expect to find also the contributory poets standing attentive while chanting the glory of our state, to give us heart. For we badly want encouragement; we want the justification of our condition by the bards as they celebrate its beauty. That would remove a lurking doubt we have.

The poets, unluckily, do not oblige us; not convincingly; not even Whitman. We are beginning to suspect that much of Whitman's celebration of the Modern is bluff. Whitman bluffed himself. He shouted himself down, deafening himself—for he did not want to pause, even for a moment—with lusty iteration of the naturalness of ugliness, of the native attraction of barbarities and squalor, and the intimate hairiness of chests and legs. He had to do that, for to be logical he had to make a comprehensive embrace of the society which he had persuaded

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himself he had accepted; but now and then, as a poet, he must have felt as horrified as we see Charley Chaplin does on the tight-rope in "The Circus" when the monkey's tail gets into his mouth. Whitman may say it is enjoyable, but we turn to "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," and we do not believe him. He never fully accepted it. There came a time when he let himself go at the money-changers and those who snout the pearls. He did not feel he was superior, even then, being a great man, but once in his life such a master is bound to break loose and interrupt the service in the temple of Mammon, to the pious indignation of all godly worshippers.

This French house is of the early eighteenth century, though it has inherited the twelfth century moat and towers. There is a shrine somewhere in its garden with an indefinable tradition, to which the villagers have been in the habit of repairing in devotion; but the American owner of the place, who may or may not be a Presbyterian, but who certainly owes no allegiance to Rome, is as scrupulous that the devout rite be maintained, if the villagers desire it, as that the mellowed house itself should be kept from sacrilege. So I was in the way of learning something else from the old place, where the only sound of life in the heat of noon is the undertone of unseen wings in the lofty aisles of its avenues of elms and limes, a sound that is an assurance, in the midst of still antiquity, of latent energies yet to be fulfilled. There is nothing rational in a mind given to reverence of what is lovely and of good report. To judge from the appearance of the suburbs of London—for motor roads, and houses as shrill as piercing screams, are destroying Surrey—and from the prospect of the eastern suburbs of Paris, where the horrors that arise in the development of the English countryside are even exceeded, we on our side of the Atlantic could no more be trusted with the guardianship of a corner like Salem, Mass., than any native incorporation of energetic realtors. The truth, I fear, is that national sentiment anywhere is shown in a pride which expresses itself, for the most part, in but an ugly, loud, continuous, and nonsensical noise; nations care less for their best achievements and traditions, which belong to all the world, than they do for their Sunday newspapers and chickens. This château of an ancient line, a happy relic, was saved from falling into a hen-roost and a store for farm litter by an American; not because he is an American, but because he is more than that, and would cross China, if he could, to save the world from the loss of an item of rare porcelain. To him beauty is not national, but is the charge of whoever happens to know it.

In all its aspects created beauty is our chief justification before Heaven, and so its care is the charge of any man on whom light has fallen as a sign. That nation is the great nation where this sign of grace is most welcomed; but as yet that sign is nowhere welcomed as a national historical event so noteworthy that even a "pacifist" could record it joyfully without reproof. I merely remark, therefore, that this American is also a citizen of the only country some of us now acknowledge as ours, a privilege he shares with some unknown soldiers who wore all the varieties of the tin hat; a country which is not discussing the question of disarming, for there is no anxiety about its frontiers, a country which has no premier or president to whom one of its people would give five minutes' attention, unless he had something to say; though I must admit that the tax it levies upon anyone willing to bear it is fairly steep. It is not one of the new little countries which the late war released from bondage, though it is far more ancient than any Great Power, if not on the map. Its citizens know each other, when they chance to meet, but that is as much as you can say about them. They do not often meet.

There is an avenue of old trees leading up to the house in which the full day is but a greenish twilight. Beyond the framing end of the avenue the front of the house, looking to the south, seems self-luminous, the light and color of a newly risen harvest moon. The ridge of the steeply pitched tiles of the roof is as casual along the blue of the sky as an outcrop of coral rock, which frost has

moulded, and the tiles, too precipitous for verdure, are immemorial with lichens. An artist had to build such a place, and it took two centuries to finish it, but its light is no less than the aura from the best that man has done on one of his more likely places under heaven. You get not only a surmise of his ancient establishment, which was long before Rome was built, or even Athens became possible, but realize that, in spite of the energetic efforts of some of his kind towards a more efficient organization of his resources, which have seriously interrupted him, he has done rather well. If it is not possible to feel foolishly hopeful about him, yet in such a scene one may be tranquil. He has some good things to go upon. He has been given a right lead, if only he could happen on the clue to its whereabouts. If he wants it at any time, it exists for him.

We know, as literary critics, and as critics of much else, that it would be silly and softening to consider the lilies. They make no effort. They make no noise. If they are not noticed they do not grieve. They merely are. It is possible they do not worry even when their sweetness is wasted on the desert air. It would be ridiculous to consider a virtue which merely is, and claims nothing, not even recognition. Such a virtue is no better than the voice which was inattentive to its business because it was still and small. A proper instinct warns us to ignore such hints. If ever we paused to consider whether something not altogether without importance was to be learned from a sign that made no effort to attract our attention, there is no telling but that things might go hard with us. To discover a voice which was so gentle it could not be heard, if one preferred not to listen to it, but which, if the ear were so inclined, could empty out the importance of much that was imposing and urgent, would be very serious. We know that well enough; but in the deadening uproar of our ever-revolving machines we can be perfectly safe, and no harm can come to us. We can gravitate together into crowds, for moral support, and loudly cheer things in common for an assurance that we are on the only possible road.

But in that ancient house in Burgundy one sadly felt, after reading a modern book sure of its popular appeal with its force and eloquence, a suggestion of amusement in the unaltered quiet and repose. Perhaps the place had heard all that before, and knew what had happened. The dangerous idea came there, that, by chance, you had wandered into another dimension. You were lost in the spacious quiet of it. You had better be wary. If you stayed there long enough you might find you had forgotten a way back to a world you had left somewhere just round the corner on another plane. How to return to safety? I was considering this, sitting on the stone terrace; and a moon, quite as you now suggest, began to play tricks with its beam about the old towers, and within the dim aisle opposite of tree-columns, and made me see things there which have no place with sane people; then something began to speak beside me.

I record but the literal truth. There was a voice. Nobody was there. No voice could be as small as that either, nor as still. No bell—the sound was bell-like—could be so minute. It sounded clearly enough, however, where the order of things was not quite right. There was no escape. The voice could not be ignored. You had to listen. The sound was so frail and musical that it could be heard only when the air had been emptied of sunlight and the head of serious thought. Fairies have been abolished; and time they were, too, because when there seems no escape from the control of matters of fact we can dispense with magic spells. I knew, that is, that the music I heard was but the soliloquy of a small lizard. Yet if only our own words could be made light and simple enough to carry that music . . . though who would hear it except when the moon was at its tricks? How could one do work which was worth doing when back in Babel with this hungry generation—make an effort to keep up with the eloquence of the major prophets, and the cheer leaders, and the greater passages in our glorious history—if confused by such oblique hints?

H. M. Tomlinson, author of the foregoing article, affectionately known to his friends as "Tom-mie," is by those who know him regarded as one of the rarest spirits and ablest writers of the day in England. He began his career as a journalist on the Morning Leader at the time that paper was united with the Daily News. When Great Britain entered the World War, he was for a time war correspondent in Belgium and France, eventually becoming official correspondent at British headquarters of the British Army in France. On his return to England he became Literary Editor of the Nation and Athenæum, holding that position until 1925. His publications include "The Sea and the Jungle" (Dutton), "Old Junk" (Knopf), "London River" (Knopf), "Waiting for Daylight" (Knopf), "Tidemarks" (Harpers), "Under the Red Ensign" (William & Norgate), "Gifts of Fortune" (Harpers), and "Gallions Reach" (Harpers).

Everyman's Soliloquy

THE HAMLET OF A. MACLEISH. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1928. \$1.50.

Reviewed by LOUIS UNTERMEYER

THIS is not only one of MacLeish's strangest compositions, it is one of the most curious poems any American has written—and, like "The Wasteland," one of the most disturbing. Its method is both queer and straightforward. Hearing (or reading) Shakespeare's play, a phrase here, a stage direction there, has plunged the poet deeper into himself. The half-conscious breaks through; remote associations, shifting allusions, griefs, phantasms, tag-ends of memories float up. Shakespeare's tragedy becomes his, ours, Everyman's. By overtone and undercurrent, the reader is led to identify himself—as the author has done—with the eternal Hamlet, that complex of poet, procrastinator, lover, ranter, doer, and doubter.

. . . You too have felt . . . You also
At night walking . . . O at night . . . And walking
Under the trees at evening . . . You too!

For all the charge of obscurity, the application is unmistakable. This is no more exclusively the Hamlet of A. MacLeish than the "Song of Myself" is the personal celebration of Walt Whitman.

Technically, the mechanics of this lengthy, self-interrupted monologue are less striking than those of "Streets in the Moon," but they are more integrated. Partly in blank verse, partly in definite and concealed rhyme, the broken details unite in a slowly gathering design, complicated and climactic. The idiom may be recognized at the outset. Thus the opening:

Elsinore. From these night fields and waters do men raise,
A platform for sleepers from their bed,
Born, mortal men and haunted with brief days,
Their eyes to that vast silence overhead.
They see the moon walk slowly in her ways
And the grave stars and all the dark outspread.
They raise their mortal eyelids from the ground:
question it . . .
What art thou . . .
And no sound.

The structure, it will be seen, recalls MacLeish's continued debt to Eliot, but the pattern is increasingly tighter. As interludes, smoothing the bristling self-analysis, one finds the long legato passage beginning "Night after night I lie like this listening" and the vague outlines of the Parzifal legend (called "Bleheris" when first published in "A Miscellany of American Poetry"), curiously unifying mosaics.

If one looks only for the unusual it is in his phrase-making that MacLeish has gone furthest, as far—and sometimes along the same associative approach—as E. E. Cummings. But it is neither his phrase-making nor his subject that distinguishes MacLeish's latest. It is the discipline, the order he imposes on the chaos of the subconscious, the employment of his difficult material. Beginning with the short breath, MacLeish proves he knows how to draw the long line.