

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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Keeping Pace With Life

IT would, we suppose, be granted without any controversy that though ours is an age of intellectual curiosity it is hardly one of intellectual speculation. The masses are too busy living, and the leaders are too busy rationalizing, for any large proportion of the people to be indulging in abstract theorizing. Much of our intellectual effort goes not into philosophizing but into humanizing, not into justifying the ways of God to man but into examining the ways of man in relation to the gods of production.

It could not well be otherwise in a civilization so impetuous and so fertile as that of present-day America. Speculation, after all, except in the case of the rare individual who is superior to the jostling distractions of the senses, is the concomitant of quiet and solitude. It needs the long leisure of uninterrupted days to be consecutive, and to batten it must have a modicum of stability in the conditions on which it bases its interest. Now, American civilization, at any rate American urban civilization, and we are increasingly becoming a nation of city-dwellers, is the very negation of all that makes for rumination. It is vigorous, it is colorful, it is febrile, it is impressionistic, it is anything but brooding. Your urbanite is more and more the prey of his senses. How can he project his thinking into the abstract, when every moment and from every direction the immediate and the physical are being forced upon his consciousness? Sound, light, movement bombard him steadily. He is being whirled from one place and one obligation to another, the building he has gazed at today tomorrow has yielded to a different, the book he was reading yesterday next month is forgotten for a later, the very business he trembled to establish has been merged into a greater. Change is the order of his day, so how can concentration be the habit of his thinking?

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Naturally this condition must have its reaction on our literature. In fiction it has quite obviously found its reflection in the stripped narrative and staccato dialogue so frequent in the contemporary novel, while in *belles lettres* it has shown a negative reaction in the absence of the pleasantly discursive peregrinations into the byways of observation which once constituted the stuff of our essays. Moreover, it has, we believe had its reflection not alone in the character but also in the number of our novels. To a certain extent it has brought about in the field of fiction a situation analogous to that which the writing of free verse introduced into that of poetry. Today everyone seems to feel himself competent to write fiction. And why not, since fiction is so often content to be a portrayal of externalities, a mere reportorial reproduction of scenes and incidents untinged by thought, untransmuted by a reasoned philosophy from a picture of living to an interpretation of life? When dialogue can be reduced to the mere give and take of intercourse, when character is supposed to be revealed through conversation and to be explicable on the basis of half-understood psychological theories, and when musing is held to weaken narration, then the person whose knowledge of humanity is a mere veneer of superficial observation, who takes no time to see living in perspective or ponder upon it sufficiently to see a pattern to existence, can dare to believe that by merely stringing scenes together with a meretricious attention to detail, carrying them along on a thread of clever or risqué dialogue, he can produce a novel that is worth the reading.

Impressions do not necessarily constitute knowledge, any more than analysis and interpretation pre-

Babylon

By LIZETTE WOODSWORTH REESE

How many miles to Babylon?
Three score and ten.
Can I get there by candlelight?
Yes, and back again.

Nursery Rhyme.

YOU change, I change, not Babylon
Not Babylon at all
And its rich, quiet loveliness;
Field, turnpike, wall.

The country carts in creaking blue
At a whip's crack
Go up the hill and down the hill
And then creak back.

In Sunday dusks the small girls pull
The larkspurs there,
For pink white wreaths to set within
Their books of prayer.

This Week

"A Survey of Modernist Poetry," and
"Contemporaries and Snobs."

Reviewed by H. M. KALLEN.

"John Jacob Astor."

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS.

"War."

Reviewed by LEONARD H. NASON.

"Overshadowed."

Reviewed by ROBERT B. MACDOUGALL.

"The Deruga Trial."

Reviewed by E. W. BENSON.

"The Science of Society."

Reviewed by NATHAN MILLER.

John Mistletoe.

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

"The Brownings."

Reviewed by SAMUEL CHEW.

Next Week, or Later

Salvation by Philosophy.

By RALPH BARTON PERRY.

suppose dulness. To make literature out of living requires the solvent of meditation. All the forces of our civilization are against meditation. Yet there are a thousand manifestations of our social culture that cry out for it. The problem for our literature seems to be how to bring into pregnant relation the reflective mind that naturally shuns confusion and hurry, and the hurry and confusion so prolific of phenomena for consideration. That, in the last analysis, we suppose, is a problem for the individual.

Ineffable Snark*

By H. M. KALLEN

Come listen, my men, while I tell you again
The five unmistakable marks
By which you may know, wheresoever you go,
The warranted, genuine snarks.

Let us take them in order. The first is the taste.
Which is meagre and hollow, but crisp:
Like a coat that is rather too tight in the waist,
With a flavor of Will-o'-the-Wisp.

Its habit of getting up late, you'll agree
That it carries too far when I say
That it frequently breakfasts at five o'clock tea,
And dines on the following day.

The third is its slowness in taking a jest.
Should you happen to venture on one
It will sigh like a thing that is deeply distressed:
And it always looks grave at a pun.

The fourth is its fondness for bathing machines
Which it constantly carries about
And believes that they add to the beauty of scenes—
A sentiment open to doubt.

The fifth is ambition. It next will be right
To describe each particular batch:
Distinguishing those that have feathers and bite,
From those that have whiskers and scratch.

For although common snarks do no manner of harm,
Yet I feel it my duty to say
Some are Boojums—

WHEN Dante belonged to the apothecaries' guild and Villon to the goodly fellowship of thieves, their craft was a hidden lore and their trades owned a religious secret and a heavenly inspiration and protector. Carpentry was no less from the gods than prophecy and weaving than poetry: for every craftsman had his company and was the initiated master of a mystery. The time is long past when the carpenter, the weaver, the smith and the barber surgeon referred their arts to a revelation from on high and practised them under the inspiration and supervision of the appropriate patron divinities. The mystery has departed from them. The guild has been replaced by the trades-union; the apprentice by the schoolboy. Knowledge of materials and the tradition of workmanship are now imparted in the open, without initiation and without ritual. Such vestiges of the mysteries of a craft which survive, survive by virtue of a new function. They serve no longer to transmit a technique. They serve only to pay for a companionate conviviality or to insure "union standards and conditions." Alone religion and poetry continue to dwell by usage and consent in the mysterious fane. That religion should do so is to be expected. Mystery is its vocation and it fights a rearguard action before the light. Churches institutionalize mysteries and churchmen practice them for livelihood. It has ever been so, and so it will remain while religion survives among men.

Mystification in poetry has a less consistent history. To some degree it flows and ebbs like a back-water tide. One day the companions of the craft will be all for scientific matter-of-factness, for positivism, and verbalizing efficiency; another day they will be all for inspiration and metaphysics. But on the whole, inspiration and metaphysics have ruled the field. In spite of the long tradition of empirical criticism which Aristotle's "Poetics" began, the earlier, more primitive Platonic sentiment still overrules the scientific insight. Poets from Horace to Poe, from Poe to Amy Lowell, have in vain laid bare the fane. Estheticians and psychologists, from

*A SURVEY OF MODERNIST POETRY. By LAURA RIDING and ROBERT GRAVES. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1928.

CONTEMPORARIES AND SNOBS. By LAURA RIDING. The same.

Aristotle to Freud and from Ribot to Kostyleff, have in vain laid bare the anatomy of the machine out of which Dionysus and Apollo illusorily step. Each generation rehabilitates the mystery for itself. As Emerson writes: "The universal nature, too strong for the petty nature of the bard, sits on his neck and writes through his hand; so that when he seems to vent a mere caprice and wild romance, the issue is an exact allegory. Hence Plato said that poets utter great and wise things which they do not themselves understand."

The perennial notion that the poet is a vehicle for something in men called Poetry by whose inspiration and power he is a poet is a notion set forth and argued anew in the most recent vindication of poetry and derogation of poets by two contemporaries of the craft.

According to Mr. Graves and Miss Riding, there exists an Eternal Something which they call Poetry or A Poem. This Eternal Something takes possession of the poet and utters itself through him. Why it should behave in so peculiar a way they do not explain. It is enough for them that "the poem exists before it is written," that it is absolute and can neither be born, nor grow, nor decay, nor be better or worse, as is the fate of those unfortunate events of experience which are not poems. "There is no progress of poetry any more than there is a progress of time. There is a progress of matter, but this is a permanent progress of corruption." Progress in the art of poetry, consequently, is an alteration in the personality of the poet without any effect on the character of his poem. The poet is the medium through which Poetry becomes manifest to the city of the world; the Mother Immaculate in whom that Word which is God comes to immaculate conception and is made print and dwells on earth. The perfect poet would be an utterly transparent medium leaving the white radiance of Poetry unstained: "authorship is not a matter of the right use of the will but the enlightened withdrawal of the will to make room for a new will."

In itself, this antiquated and curious doctrine is so commonplace an antiquity and curiosity that it would not need to detain the attention. Croce is the last who spoke it as one having authority. Miss Riding and Mr. Graves combine with it, however, another doctrine which is the antithesis of this one. They hold that the poet who should be the transparent, passive instrument of Poetry-with-a capital-P, must at the same time be a complete and ineffable individual, as ineffable as Poetry itself, that he must be a sort of Steinerian Ego, even more unashamed of his person than Maxwell Bodenheim, and even more idiosyncratic in his utterance than Gertrude Stein. They do not mention Maxwell Bodenheim among the practitioners of modern poetry who are signalized as contemporaries or snobs, or both, although none they do mention incarnates their ideal Poet. So far as I can see, only a personality who lives like Bodenheim and writes like Stein could be its enfleshment, their Poetic Mother of their Poetic Word made man and dwelling on earth. Everybody else, whatever school he may belong to, is a human being living in an environment to which he is sensitive and responds. His poems are his reactions to the *Zeitgeist*, to Criticism, to Science, and to all the other items of the complex of institutions, traditions, and activities of which civilization is made up. Riding and Graves, in the rôle of law-givers to poets, however, require the poet to be responsive only to "Poetry-with-a-capital-P"; and then not really responsive but simply non-resistant to the transcendental Poetry which syphons itself through his personality. They declare that he does and must fight the *Zeitgeist* and everything else in defense and vindication of the integrity of the living, unique personality which he is. What this Poetry would be about, could the poet meet their requirements and be like God, a Person-in-a-Vacuum, they refrain from saying.

One cannot doubt the wisdom of this abstemiousness, particularly in face of the data and reasonings they use to establish their argument. Instead of unique poetic personalities working at science, criticism, or poetry and responding to the uniquely individual events of time and place and circumstance, they marshal a squad of institutional abstractions, personified through the pathetic fallacy like figures in a medieval morality play, and modern only in that the personification is unmarked by capital letters. Instead of exhibiting living experiences, they manipulate general philosophic abstractions which are

not even derived from experience. And they manipulate them in order to prove and to vindicate the very individuality which they set up to oppose to these abstractions. By means of metaphysical, sociological discussion of poets and poetry, Miss Riding and Mr. Graves purport to nullify the obvious social background and social origins of the poetic personality and the poetic imagination.

For example, Miss Riding distinguishes between civilization and barbarism. To her, civilization is a system of specialization and individuality; barbarism is merely collectivism of any sort. With the movement from the medieval to the modern world, the place and function of the poet, she notices, has been changed. The change consists in the fact that the modern poet is not included in his environment as were the poets of earlier times in theirs. Today's poet has an appeal which is specific and limited: instead of one general audience for all poets, each poet now has his own particular audience just as each priest has his own particular congregation of devotees and each grocer his own particular concourse of customers. Whether the historical observation be correct or not—and I regard it as obviously false—it is true that there are individual, though often overlapping, publics for individual artists just as there are individual collections of customers for individual grocers. The position of the poet in this respect is not different from the position of any other craftsman—be he doctor, lawyer, merchant, or thief, butcher, baker, or candlestick-maker. But Miss Riding deduces from this general eventuality of modern life a special piece of—to her—bad luck for the poet. It has rendered poetry, she deplures, a mere art, an insecure craft in an inimical world, ever under the duress of defending itself against competitors. Upon the poet the eventuality has imposed the task of being critic as well as poet. It has forced him away from reality and imposed upon him snobbism and the withdrawal from life. Poetry, which to her and Mr. Graves is "not a minor branch of civilization but a complete and separate form of energy . . . has now," she moans, "assumed the position of philosophy," as if no such poets as Lucretius or Horace or Dante or Goethe or Shakespeare or Parmenides or Theognis or Tennyson or Fitzgerald had ever existed, and no Matthew Arnold had anticipated T. S. Eliot. It is enough merely to point out how thoroughly these conclusions contradict the premises they are derived from. To Mr. Graves and to Miss Riding the modern poet is endowed with all the attributes of the elusive ineffable Snark; and neither their thimbles nor their care, their forks nor their hope, their menacing railway share, nor their smiles and soap can turn one up. For their Snark is a Boojum, and no contemporary fills the bill.

The self contradictions which appear in the description of events—even of poetic events—have, as a rule, one of two sources, or both. Of these sources the first is a contradiction inherent in the fluxful nature of things themselves. Because each thing must be born and grow up and grow old and die, its generic name must describe a multitude of opposed qualities and combative attributes. Contradiction, therefore, is its heart; its biography must be a drama of inconsistencies bound by the continuity of its living phases from its start to its finish. The other source of self-contradiction is a conflict of motives in the heart of the observer. This leads to confusion in his mind.

The biography of poetry as a succession in civilization of events of a certain kind is of its own nature full of enough dramatic confrontations and conflicts to satisfy the greediest appetite for contradiction. It does not require an added embroilment of disturbed emotions in its biographers and analysts. Yet, the painful impression comes to me that this, rather than insight, is what Mr. Graves and Miss Riding bring to their discussion of poetry. Who knows what frustrations and repressions and somnambulisms lie behind their morbid insistence on "personal reality" and their quarrelsome denunciations of schools and sects? Who knows what drives them to flight from the really personal experience of making poems to a metaphysical world in which making poems is an illusion? If what they say about the nature of poetry is true, what they say about the personal reality of the poet and his relation to the world he lives in cannot be true. If their views of the unique personality of the poet and his imagination are correct, their views of the nature of poetry are compensatory rationalizations.

From the point of view of living experience, a poem, like a child, is an event in biography. It is no immaculate perfection descended from the empyrean. Its conception presupposes the impact of stimulation from the surrounding world. Its maturation in the poet's mind and its final setting down in words presuppose the idiosyncrasy of the poet's character reacting to the impact of all the forces he is able to respond to. Its publication launches it into a competitive free-for-all in which other poems, publication methods, publicity, and reviewers are potent factors. Whether it will survive or perish determines itself by the same process which determines the extinction or survival of every other item in the world. No more mystery attaches to its origin and struggle for survival than to that of any other person or event.

Now a poet is a craftsman who has acquired unusual skill in the manipulation of words. Poets' mythology and critical tradition to the contrary notwithstanding his sensibilities are not so important as his skills. A deaf Beethoven is still a greater musician than an infinitely more sensitive Pavlovian dog. Empirically, the mastery of the medium of expression has far more significance than sensitive awareness of the causes which give rise to expression. Were it not so, every Freud would be a Leonardo. One of the most persistent errors of the usual philosophies of poetry and the other arts is the belief that the meaning of the poem is identical with its cause, and that poetic utterance communicates the experience which evokes the utterance. This happens sometimes, and is often intended by poets. But far more often the gulf between that which becomes a poem and that which the poem communicates is as deep as the gulf between the bouquet of a flower and the fertilizer out of which it grows. Empirically, poetry is a highly skilled transformation of different types of experience into verbal experience. Empirically, poetry is not a reproduction of different types of experience by means of verbal experience.

Now verbal experience is extremely complex. It has always involved the synergy of two abilities: the ability to make sounds and the ability to hear them. And since the elaboration and spread of the art of printing, verbal experience in the western world has more and more required the ability to see sounds.

To the modern, and far more intensely to the modernist, verbal sound is conditioned upon three activities of the personality: the speech-producing, the auditory, and the visual. But it is *verbal* sound for still another reason. And this reason is the sense which it makes. No verbal sound—whether addressed to the ear or to the eye—exists, which is not a sign for something other than itself. It is no news that its function as a sign can be reinforced by its nature as a sound or sight; there is an element of news in the observation that the intrinsic character of verbal sound may conflict with its significative purpose and weaken it. Until very recently the height of poetic skill was held to lie in the perfection with which sound and sense could be fused. And this view still prevails in respectable critical circles, in which I with small hesitation include Miss Riding and Mr. Graves. Their discussion of modernist poetry ignores precisely the specific difference in virtue of which it is modern. I feel their analysis of Messrs. E. E. Cummings, T. S. Eliot, the Sitwells, Paul Valéry, and others, to be acute. But I fail to find that a single one of the categories which they apply to these contemporaries is inapplicable to any poet in the long history of poetry. It is because of this generic, unindividualized significance of their categories that they are able in specific respects to assimilate Mr. E. E. Cummings to Mr. Wm. Shakespeare. They recognize that both poets aim at a compenetration of sound with sense. And the sense which the poet is ostensibly sounding is either some ineffable feeling or some philosophic vision. Sense makes sound and sound makes sense. The impression which the sound sets up in the ear is required to be if not coincident, at least continuous, with the image or meaning it communicates to the mind.

It need not be argued that this can be said of all poetry. What can be said of modernist poetry is another story. This story has its beginnings in the influence of the printer's art upon the poet's technique. Language used to be something spoken and heard. It is now hardly less something spoken and seen. The typographical differences between the upper and lower case letters, the shape and purpose