

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

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Speculation

THIS is sheer speculation, of course, but it is worth considering: When literary fashions change, who does the real changing, who leads; who follows, not because they will, but because they must? Is it the brain that leads (and sometimes misleads) the other members?

Old-fashioned romance and sentiment feed fat in the movies, utterly oblivious to the sophistication, realism, naturalism, cynicism that are the chief concern of the foremost novelists today. The best reading intellects, so we are told, batten on detective stories, certainly not because they find great literature there, since the detective story is clearly decadent, and its one novel mystery is how so many old tricks can be used over and over again with some success. Mr. Sabatini who is a skilful, if not a great, historical romancer never fails of his market, and if George Preedy's "General Crack" did not sell 100,000 copies, it was only because the public were not yet warmed to the author's name.

It is not the followers, it is the leaders that have changed. They, the real leaders—with a few exceptions, like the two men named above—have lost interest in adventure, heroism, romance, and have clasped everyday life to their bosoms, thrilling with psychological thrills and neurotic shivers. And the best books of this decade have naturally, therefore, been realistic, scientific, interpretative, representing what seems to be true to observation rather than what ought or might be true to wish and hope, so we say that the age has changed its taste, that human nature has altered, that interests are different!

H. G. Wells, with his shrewd cockney eye, and his liberal scientific mind set on the democratic future, gets his hundred thousand readers, why?—because he wants what the populace wants, or because he writes so well of it? Sir Walter Scott, that old reactionary, who really believed in feudalism, and therefore loved it, and saw its best side, and warmed his imagination over it—did he get his hundred thousand readers in the little United States that then was, because he ran against the currents of a republic changing itself with startling rapidity into a democracy, or because he was so stirred by heroes and heroism that the very people who were shouting for the rights of the common man read him with delight? If it had been Scott, instead of Godwin, who wrote of liberal ideas and the ideals of freedom, we might have read more Scott. But since he wrote what he loved, what he could write of superbly, we read him, Jeffersonian republicans, Jackson democrats, everyone read Scott.

In the professional talk of periods, influences, reactions, much must be discounted. They exist, of course, and social and economic movements, such as those which made modern journalism possible, lie behind them. But at the end and the beginning of writing, is the writer. When he writes a great book that is widely read he makes a fashion. It is what interests him that determines the direction of literary popularity, for he creates popularity. If the most talked of books now are of complexes and complexities, that does not mean that the public has lost interest in romance and will feed now only upon Freudianism. It means only that the best writers are not writing romance. And the answer that something in their environment makes them realists, is not so convincing as it sounds.

As, for example, if Scott, with his vigor, his zest for adventure, his relish for distinguished living, his hatred of dull everyday complications, should limp

Sonnet

By HENRIETTE DE S. BLANDING

A SONNET is a hellish thing to write. Petrarch and Spenser left us much to do. I am weary of burning candles in the night With neat iambs rhyming two and two. I'd rather travel with some gypsy carter Over red roads fierce with the desert sun, Scour greasy pots with sand, and maybe barter A spavined horse for corn or rusted gun. Then when a yellow moon hung in the east, Wrapped in a bright serape at his side Sleep like a stone, wanting nor ring nor priest, A mongrel dog to watch our fire. Pride Works strangely. Since you are not he, instead I find these scribbled verses by my bed.

Modern Morality*

By CHARLES A. BENNETT

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MR. WALTER LIPPMANN quotes a remark of Huxley's—"a man's worst troubles begin when he is free to do as he likes." The words have a painful relevance to our present discontents. Any reflective person today might well exclaim, *de ma fabula!* For we are certainly free. The traditional sanctions have been dissolved by what Mr. Lippmann calls "the acids of modernity." The intellectual security in which our fathers lived is as remote as a Golden Age. A cosmic scheme in which the drama and destiny of the human soul are known and understood, a moral code defining duties and specifying rewards and punishments that has been revealed through the medium of an inspired book or an inspired society, an established social order whose conventions and institutions derive their authority from a supernatural source,—none of these certainties is for us. There is hardly an institution today that is not being challenged to present its credentials. In morals we are all for toleration and personal liberty. In our political philosophy we are pluralists or individualists. Art, in revolt against "stale conventions," is hot for experiment and novelty. Organized religion is being dissipated into fantastic cults or is evaporating in the religiosity of a purely personal mysticism. Truly we have won our freedom. Yet it seems to have brought us only a clamor and confusion of tongues: preferences that we cannot justify and desires without a standard. Modern man—

finds that the civilization of which he is a part leaves a dusty taste in his mouth. He may be very busy with many things, but he discovers one day that he is no longer sure they are worth doing. He has been much preoccupied, but he is no longer sure he knows why. He has become involved in an elaborate routine of pleasures; and they do not seem to amuse him very much. He finds it hard to believe that doing any one thing is better than doing any other thing, or, indeed, that it is better than doing nothing at all. It occurs to him that it is a great deal of trouble to live, and that even in the best of lives the thrills are few and far between.

To the defenders of the old régime, to the guardians of the faith, the devotees of discipline, and the champions of Law and Order, the prevailing scepticism, individualism, and experimentation are symptoms of insubordination or moral perversity. Thus if you plead for more lenient divorce laws you will be told that you are hankering after free love; the advocates of birth control are suspected of wanting to make easy the path of the sensualist; the ideal of personal liberty is dismissed as a polite term for "license." The professional moralist meets the situation by trying to scold or threaten men back to conformity. That is hopeless. For, as Mr. Lippmann points out, the essence of our predicament is not that men are defiant or wicked, but that they are frankly bewildered, "ridden by doubts because they do not know what they prefer, nor why." It is useless to appeal to authority when the very idea of authority has become incredible:—

It is presumptuous to issue moral commandments, for in fact nobody has authority to command. It is useless to command when nobody has the disposition to obey. It is futile when nobody really knows exactly what to command. . . . Yet there remain the wants which orthodoxy of some sort satisfies. The natural man, when he is released

* A PREFACE TO MORALS. By WALTER LIPPMANN. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1929. \$2.50.

This Week



"On the Bottom."

Reviewed by JOHN CARTER.

"Red Tiger."

Reviewed by ARTHUR RUHL.

"Passing."

Reviewed by W. B. SEABROOK.

"Wolf Solent."

Reviewed by ERNEST SUTHERLAND BATES.

"Cement."

Reviewed by V. F. CALVERTON.

"Twelve Bad Men."

Reviewed by ARTHUR COLTON.

"Freedom of the Seas."

Reviewed by STEWART BEACH.

A Poetry Review.

By LOUIS UNTERMEYER.

Next Week, or Later

"Angels and Earthly Creatures."

Reviewed by MARY M. COLUM.

again among the living, would he not assuredly write, not another "Lady of the Lake" or "Ivanhoe," but certainly a romance with a plot that would run away with interest, and characters; bold, striking, imaginative, not subtle, not scientific, not inhibited or neurotic! He would write a broad and moving story, rich in personalities, sinewy with events, tingling with hearty prejudices of loyalty and courage, less long-winded than his old books, and with fewer stops for stage scenery, but with a height of sheer narrative interest that no contemporary could equal. Would the age of realism daunt him, or any writer with his strength and his obsessions? Not a bit. Would he get praise and a following? Most certainly. The Scotts of the last age and this one have been little men: the great souls have been Dostoyevskys, Flauberts, Hardys, Merediths, and Jameses. Was this due to climate, to historic movements, to psychological shifts, to the industrial revolution, to science and its materialisms? Yes, to all of them; and yet not all together explain the change in our books. Scratch a realist in any period and you bare romantic cuticle. Give a romancer a stomach ache and he turns toward realism.

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from restraints, and has no substitute for them, is at sixes and sevens with himself and the world. For in the free play of his uninhibited instincts he does not find any natural substitute for those accumulated convictions which, however badly they did it, nevertheless organized his soul, economized his effort, consoled him, and gave him dignity in his own eyes, because he was part of some greater whole. . . . And so the modern world is haunted by a realization, which it becomes constantly less easy to ignore, that it is impossible to reconstruct an enduring orthodoxy, and impossible to live well without the satisfaction which an orthodoxy would provide.

I have given a mere sketch of the way in which Mr. Lippmann envisages the problem as it is today presented to the student of morals. Readers who wish to see how the details are filled in will find in Part I of his book a discerning analysis of the causes and consequences of "the dissolution of the ancestral order." There was a time when religion inspired, protected, and unified all the major interests of human life. The last five hundred years have seen the children of religion growing up and leaving home. One by one the various interests have claimed and secured their independence. Today the principle of autonomy has triumphed. We have become experts in fixing territorial boundaries. At every frontier we have set up warning signs, "Keep out. This means you." We have assigned a proper sphere to science and a proper sphere to religion. We regard the separation of Church and State as an achievement. We no longer confuse art with morals, and business we have discriminated from both. The thing has happened partly in the course of natural development, partly as a consequence of change in historic circumstances. The result shows elements both of gain and loss. It is with the loss that Mr. Lippmann is chiefly concerned. For to say that religion no longer regulates our civic duties, our economic activities, our family life, and our opinions, is to say that nothing regulates them. We confront a number of independent activities, each claiming, as it were, to be a self-sufficient good. To choose one of them would be fanaticism; to harmonize them is beyond our powers. The breakdown of the traditional order thus means that our civilization lacks unity, coherence, and direction. What it all comes to and whether it is bound are questions we cannot answer. In spite of conspicuous accomplishment in different fields, in spite of much talk of progress, we have an uneasy feeling that our lives lack ultimate significance.

In Part II, the author tells us the direction in which he looks for a solution. What he gives us is, in effect, the outlines of a philosophy of humanism. Since no merely external authority can any longer convince, the standard must come from within. The only restraint modern men will accept is that which is imposed on them by the demands of their own human nature when that nature has been understood. The good life, then, is neither an irrational surrender to immature desire on the one hand, nor an equally irrational if reluctant acceptance of duty on the other. It is the life which recommends itself to us when our desires have been schooled by a knowledge of hard fact and enlightened by intelligent criticism. From this point of view the function of the moralist is not to command but to persuade:—

To persuade he must show that the course of conduct he advocates is not an arbitrary pattern to which vitality must submit, but that which vitality itself would choose if it were clearly understood. He must be able to show that goodness is victorious vitality, and badness defeated vitality.

Far from claiming any novelty for these ideas, Mr. Lippmann is at pains to show that they are the burden of wisdom both ancient and modern. The persistent note of Greek and modern philosophy is that the good is the object of intelligent desire, and Mr. Lippmann quotes from sayings of Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Spinoza, to show that the spirit of their teaching was one of detachment and disinterestedness. Finally, psychologists today are telling us that the development of personality is concomitant with a putting away of childish things, and with an emancipation from immature, illusory, and undisciplined aspirations. The good man is the mature man and the mature man is he who is adapted to reality.

No, the novelty lies not in the ideas but in their application to contemporary problems. To this the third part of the book is devoted. Space forbids me to follow in detail the discussion of business, of government, and of the ethics of love and marriage. His treatment of these themes is extraordinarily il-

luminating and of great practical value. I will content myself with quoting two or three passages in order to suggest what this philosophy of humanism comes to when it is brought to bear on concrete issues:—

Insofar as industry itself evolves its own control, it will regain its liberty from external interference. To say that is to say simply that the "natural liberty" of the early business man was unworkable because the early business man was unregenerate; he was immature, and he was therefore acquisitive. The only kind of liberty which is workable in the real world is the liberty of the disinterested man, of the man who has transformed his passions by an understanding of necessity. . . .

The naively democratic theory was that out of the mass of the voters there arose a cloud of wills which ascended to heaven, condensed into a thunderbolt, and then smote the people. It was supposed that the opinion of masses of persons somehow became the opinion of a corporate person called The People, and that this corporate person then directed human affairs like a monarch. But that is not what happens. Government is in the people and stays there. Government is their multitudinous decisions in concrete situations, and what officials do is to assist and facilitate this process of governing. Effective laws may be said to register an understanding among those concerned by which the law-abiding know what to expect and what is expected of them; . . .

But if it is the truth that the convention of marriage correctly interprets human experience, whereas the separatist conventions are self-defeating, then the convention of marriage will prove to be the conclusion which emerges out of all this immense experimenting. It will survive, not as a rule of law imposed by force, for that is now, I think, become impossible. It will not survive as a moral commandment with which the elderly can threaten the young. They will not listen. It will survive as the dominant insight into the reality of love and happiness, or it will not survive at all.

The book is provocative and there are many places where one would like to stop and engage the author in discussion. I must, however, confine myself to one criticism. I find a serious ambiguity in Mr. Lippmann's conception of humanism. To put it briefly, he seems to have confused humanism with Stoicism. There is no doubt that it is the ideals of Stoicism which appeal most strongly to him, and my guess would be that his personal predilections have given a quality and emphasis to his argument that do not properly belong to it. The mature man, he says—

Cannot let his wishes become too deeply involved in things. He can no longer count on possessing whatever he may happen to want. And therefore he must learn to want what he can possess. He can no longer hold forever the things at which he grasps; for they change, and slip away. And therefore he must learn to hold on to things which do not slip away and change, to hold on to things, not by grasping them, but by understanding them and by remembering them. . . . He would take the world as it comes, and within himself remain quite unperturbed. . . . He would be strong, not with the strength of hard resolves, but because he was free of that tension which vain expectations beget. . . . Since nothing gnawed at his vitals, neither doubt or ambition, nor frustration, nor fear, he would move easily through life. And so whether he saw the thing as comedy, or high tragedy, or plain farce, he would affirm that it is what it is, and that the wise man can enjoy it.

Many other passages in the same vein might be quoted. I can see no reason for giving the name of humanism to this attitude of clear-eyed, serene, and austere acceptance of ultimate fact. If this be what disinterestedness and detachment mean, then disinterestedness is only a fine name for disillusionment, and the detachment is that of an indifferent, because purely rational, observer. The objection to this is the objection that may be brought against Stoicism in all its historic forms: it clips the wings of aspiration and leads men to pitch their ambitions too low. The error of the Stoic is to think that he knows what those "hard facts" are which set the limit to human desire, that he comprehends that "reality" to which we must adjust ourselves. We do not possess such knowledge. The aspiration after immortality or the ideal of human brotherhood, for example,—are these mere childish longings for the impossible or are they to be taken seriously? No philosopher knows enough to condemn them in advance as examples of the vanity of human wishes. For one may not argue that because a respect for literal reality is a necessary factor in the education of primitive human nature, therefore it is the only factor. One cannot so easily identify enlightenment with resignation.

Mr. Lippmann, one may take it, is familiar with this type of criticism, and so when he is discussing his hopes for business, or for politics, what he recommends is not Stoicism but humanism. What he is trying to do is what he himself defines as the original business of the moralist. This is not to put a

dampener on desire by confronting it with inexorable facts, but—

To elucidate the ideals with which the modern world is pregnant. . . . Insofar as he succeeds in disentangling that which men think they believe from that which it is appropriate for them to believe, he is opening his mind to a true vision of the good life. The vision itself we can discern only faintly, for we have as yet only the occasional and fragmentary testimony of sages and saints and heroes, dim anticipations here and there, a most imperfect science of human behavior, and our own obscure endeavor to make explicit and rational the stresses of the modern world within our own souls.

No charge of inconsistency, however, should be permitted to conceal the unusual merits of this book. To read it is a continuous intellectual excitement. It is the record of a finely endowed mind, with not a little first-hand experience of human affairs, trying to think its way through and out of the moral confusion of our time. It is full of penetrating analyses and of sound criticisms. It is no less fertile in practical counsel than it is skillful in diagnosis. It is tolerant, it is wise, it is humane. The style is clear and compact. It arouses and retains the attention by its unfailing animation and vigor. To the members of our perplexed generation the book should bring a simplified conception of the world we live in and should prove to be a source of genuine enlightenment.

A Brave Story

ON THE BOTTOM. By COMMANDER EDWARD ELLSBERG. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1929. \$3.

Reviewed by JOHN CARTER

IN September, 1925, the steamer "City of Rome" rammed the U. S. Submarine, S-51, one night off Block Island. Three out of the crew of thirty-seven were picked up by the steamer's boats, six others drowning before the rescuers got to them. The rest of the crew, trapped in the submarine, were lost. The "City of Rome" did not report the accident until several hours later.

For a while the Navy Department wished to entrust salvage operations to a private wrecking company, but Commander Ellsberg prevailed on Admiral Plunkett at the New York Navy Yard and upon the Navy Department, to let him handle the job with a force of naval divers. A salvage squadron, consisting of the "Falcon," "Vestal," "Iuka," "Sagamore," and "Penobscot," with the S-50 for comparison purposes, was assembled and set to work.

The S-51 was a vessel of one thousand tons surface displacement. Our task was to lift this weight one hundred and thirty-two feet to the surface, meanwhile working in the open sea, and then tow the ship one hundred and fifty miles to New York, the nearest harbor with a suitable dry-dock.

Commander Ellsberg tells how the Navy did it. As a result he has written a terse, matter of fact account of men pitted against the perversity of machinery and the unpredictable chances of the sea, wrestling with a stubborn wreck under conditions which tested the last atom of human perseverance and courage. A new technique had to be elaborated as they went along, new tools invented, novel expedients devised, and death faced in many different guises—by "the bends," by suffocation, by drowning, by concussion, by being "squeezed" (i. e., forced into a diving helmet by pressure of water), by storm and wreck and cold.

The task sounds simple. All they had to do was to close the uninjured chambers of the submarine, seal the hatches, lower pontoons, fasten them under the vessel, and, by filling them with air, raise the S-51 to the surface. It sounds simple, especially lowering the pontoons. Here is what that one detail amounted to:

A somewhat analogous problem would be to lower a heavy Pullman car from the top of a fifteen story building which was swaying violently, due to an earthquake, to the street, in the middle of a black night when you couldn't see the street, nor the car either after you started lowering; and then land the Pullman car in a vacant space in the middle of a train standing on a track in the dark street below without dropping the car on the diner ahead or the car just behind the vacant space.

Work was kept on well into the winter, when it became apparent that new methods were required. Commander Ellsberg had to invent a torch which would burn steel under water. One diver was paralysed by "the bends," another was nearly choked due to the ice which plugged his air-hose as the water