

THE EMERGENCE OF MAN

BY GERALD HEARD

"The Life Force long ago decided that intelligence should lead."
—Gerald Heard

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Some Recent Fiction

A Tennessee Tale

THE WEATHER TREE. By MARISTAN CHAPMAN. New York: The Viking Press. 1932. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JONATHAN DANIELS

IN spite of its thin but appealing tale "The Weather Tree," the third novel by Mary and Stanton Chapman about their well beloved Tennessee mountains, is lifted above mediocrity by fine drawings of highland characters and by the strangely wrought but beautiful native prose in which the book is written. The novel would be a better book if the Chapmans, knowing the mountains so well, did not love them quite so obviously and quite so much.

The story begins almost pastorally on Red Hill, above the village of Glen Hazard, where the laurel is growing over the scars of abandoned coal mines. Lynn Clayton, the outlander, comes with dreams of progress and industry and social welfare, to develop the mines he has inherited, to make cheap coal-brick for the city poor, and to give employment and uplift to the people of the mountains. After him comes Lida Grant, the city girl, who has lent him the money to develop his mines. He breaks the mountain peace with loud intrusion. He builds houses; he chops trees; he would make Red Hill stark naked in his progress. Definitely Glen Hazard does not wish to be uplifted. It wishes only to be left alone and to be rid of this stranger. Yet the mountaineers present a tangible resistance only when Clayton's axemen touch Uncle Billy Whiteoak, the Weather Tree. The mountain confidence of "weathering" him out is disturbed only when he and Thelma Lane, the mountain heroine, fall in love. This simple narrative is deliberately accelerated by leading the love story through misunderstanding into a conventional mountain melodrama of revenge. The solution of the story, Thelma Lane's choice in loyalty, the departure of the outlander, grow out of misunderstandings created by difference in language and spirit of outlander and mountaineer. The solution is abortive but Glen Hazard settles into a peace that is real and the laurel grows back over the mines.

The central figures of the story, the outlanders, Lynn Clayton and Lida Grant, and, to a less degree, Thelma Lane and her brother Chad, are conventional figures, almost types for outland impertinence and mountain simplicity. The Lane household is an idealization of the simple life and the simple, strong, inarticulate man and woman. Opposed to this idealization, the newcomers are made unreal by a complete lack of sympathy in their drawing. Both are callow and insensitive figures from a familiar background of big house and green lawn, thin dishes and shining glass. Their meagerness makes less moving the conflict of the novel and less convincing the idealization of Glen Hazard.

With the detachment which the authors lost in drawing these characters, they have made in their minor characters a vivid community of true people. There are the three towers of Glen Hazard strength, the doctor, the preacher, the sheriff. Doc Peters practices good without believing in it. Preacher Howard begins his preaching not with Creation but with here and now. To the mountain people, Sheriff Joe Marks "had been a habit since long along and they were known just how much he would stand." A lesser figure in the community but no less in the story is Uncle Shannon Budd who pronounced himself "innocent as an un-burst robin's egg" but who was good for nothing but "to sit in a corner and foretell a hard winter." Other characters, Squirrel Mercy, Hurd Foster, Lum Morgan, are all natural and living, people as real as the mountains.

Not only in the dialogue but in their own narrative as well, Mr. and Mrs. Chapman use the forms, the words, the rhythms of mountain speech. Their metaphors and images are highland. The result is no dialect difficult to read but a vital native prose enriched by vigorous mountain and forgotten old English words. As it is shaped in "The Weather Tree" this language is not only beautiful but it seems, too, the inevitably proper language for the book.

The novel is the first to appear since the announcement that all of the Chapman books have been written in collaboration by Mr. and Mrs. Chapman and that the name Maristan is not the first name of Mrs. Chapman but a combination of the first names of both. "The Weather Tree" is the January choice of the Book League of America and is the second of their novels to be selected by a book club.

Middle-Class Annals

THE NIGHT VISITOR: And Other Stories. By ARNOLD BENNETT. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1931. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD

WE were mostly agreed that "Imperial Palace" was no more than a fair to mid-dling short story stretched out upon the rack, its sinews cracking at every page. It was saved from a sort of grisly tedium by those characters in it who appeared briefly and inconclusively and were held in no great honor. Just for that reason it was not so unfortunate as it might have been that this was the last novel Bennett wrote before he died: and just for that reason "The Night Visitor" does no violence to his reputation.

To be honest, these stories are not very good; the point is that the characters in them are the sort of people we should pass over in real life. They belong to that class which is equally barred from the best Mayfair drawing rooms and the best Limehouse public-houses . . . the great English middle class, the class of Oxford undergraduates, commercial travellers, and conservative M.P.s, the class which believes in dealing firmly with India. It despises itself with such complacent arrogance that most of the world holds it in contempt and awe; it is considered humdrum and materialistic; but of all aggregations of humanity it is perhaps the most romantic. It spends its idle hours in dreaming of what it can never be—which, if you like, is quite stupid and quite human.

Certainly no English writer of our time has been so much in sympathy with this class as Arnold Bennett, or had such a sense of its variety, or was so aware of its inward thoughts and of the strange pattern of its outward life. His best characters are always the obscure of this world. But whereas in actual life such people hope that anything may happen, and nothing does happen: in Arnold Bennett's fiction, more real than reality, they hope that anything may happen, and lo! it is so. I say this in the belief that the true Bennett was the Bennett of "Mr. Prohack" and not the Bennett of "Riceyman Steps"; and that his enduring work was the translation of unuttered and unfulfilled desires into the warmth of life and the finality of action.

Almost all the characters—certainly all the living characters—in "The Night Visitor" are symbols of an understanding and sympathy which, of its kind, can hardly be equalled in English fiction. They may be imperfect symbols, but they are not conventional symbols. The young men are generally good looking, well-dressed, and intelligent—which is a sin against the modern short story; and they have the singular temerity not to be disillusioned. The middle-aged men are affectionate,

whimsical, and financially secure. The ladies have some claim to beauty and are successful in their love affairs. The cloak room attendant owns an exquisite mansionette and an exquisite wife; the young and rather priggish don claims his passionate young beauty from baccarat and society. No heart beats in vain and every lane has a turning. . . .

Arnold Bennett's enduring work was to discover the infinite strangeness of the commonplace, and the result was that his more indifferent performances had generally a commonplace appearance. Perhaps this criticism could be brought against most of these stories. There is only little to stand between them and mechanical ingenuity; but that little bears its witness to a great personality. Bennett was often dull, incoherent, even vulgar; he wrote at most one great novel and at least three wretched ones; but few men have brought such warmth to life, and in his time he did more for English fiction than almost any other half dozen writers you could mention.

A Religious Fanatic

EBENEZER WALKS WITH GOD. By GEORGE BAKER. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1931. \$2.

Reviewed by ERNEST SUTHERLAND BATES

THIS is a curious, highly original work, half realism, half grotesque fantasy, leaving the reader considerably perplexed as to the author's purpose. It tells the story of a pious and ignorant elder of Zion Chapel who in his old age is led by his equally pious and ignorant wife to adopt an orphaned grand-nephew. At first, the elder, in his puritanical zeal, is troubled by his wife's devotion to the child, but, after a nervous breakdown, when he recovers, it is with a fixed delusion that the child is the Son of God. The bulk of the book is taken up with the effects of this delusion on the old man Ebenezer, his wife Elizabeth, and the child Paul. Elizabeth repudiates the connection and henceforth regards her husband as a combination of lunatic and blasphemer. Ebenezer takes the child and wanders off, first into the poorer section of London, and then into the hop fields of Kent. The book moves for a time into the *genre* style, with realistic pictures of the hop-workers and much use of dialect. Ebenezer wins friends among his new companions by his amiability and general harmlessness, and their attitude toward his delusion—one of half-contemptuous skepticism mingled with a vague, unconfessed fear that he may be right—is very well brought out.

One gets a vivid impression of the fertile soil for religious mysticism that still exists among those below the educational level even in these modern days. Had Ebenezer been younger or a character of more force, he might have succeeded in founding a new sect. To have done so, however, he would have needed personal ambition and an organizing ability, both of which he was quite without. As it is, he merely dies, leaving behind him only a pitying, kindly memory among his associates in the hop-fields, and unassuaged indignation on the part of his wife and her friends. The book is weakest in its treatment of the child. Paul is a pale, unconvincing creature; in so far as he is characterized at all, he is a dull, priggish youngster, who follows Ebenezer's lead uncomprehendingly; one is left entirely in doubt as to how far his future will be affected by his early experiences. Perhaps this was exactly the impression which the author sought to convey; it is quite in harmony with the tentative, exploratory character of the whole book; but it is too great a demand on the reader to expect him to be interested in such a nonentity.

Round About Parnassus

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THE first edition of *Descent to the Dead*, by Robinson Jeffers, which comes to me from Random House, one of five hundred copies numbered and signed by the author, was designed by A. G. Hoffman and printed by Printype, Inc. It is a beautiful book. But unlike most beautifully printed books nowadays the poetry it contains is actually distinguished. The language is beautiful, and robust even though the mood induced has been a dwelling on death, in the midst of cairns and dolmens and ringed circles of great stones. The poems were written in Ireland and Great Britain on the occasion of Mr. Jeffers's recent trip thither. He identifies himself with Ireland through his forefathers. He is impressed by the living quality of the great dead. He moves in the presence of mighty ghosts. They overcome for him, temporarily at least, all faith in the present living world where men seem shadows walking, a midge-dance "Of gutted and multiplied echoes of life in the latter sun." Death and life are both beautiful but death is a resolution of the discords of life, and a thing beyond and above even any earthly immortality. It is better to rest beneath the ageless stones, to be dust. Yet the dead of an age of blood and battle retain strange life:

*I hear like a hum in the ground the Boyne
running through the aging
Fields forever, and one of our great blue-
spiral-cut stones
Settle in the dark a hair's breadth under
the burden of the hill.
"We hear from cairn to cromlech all over
Ireland the dead
Whisper and conspire, and whinnies of
laughter tinkle in the raths.
The living dream but the dead are awake."*

Struck out of these pages is one wonderful phrase for the barrows near Finvoy, County Antrim,—"bee-bright necropolis." Flashing out of the reveries are two vividly terrible pictures, Mary Byrnes killing her lover on Shane O'Neill's cairn; Father O'Donnel, the old priest, spitting on his Christ before an altar in Donegal, *Because the tortured torturer is too long dying; because the strain in the wounded minds of men Leaves them no peace.*

That last is a remarkable and unforgettable presentation. While the description of the ghosts seen in England is impressive the most truly impressive of the English poems is "Subjected Earth." It is the last poem. "Shakespeare's Grave" is a fine poem, too, having Shakespeare speak of his "passionate ruins," and, at the end,

*Oh, a thousand years
Will hardly leach," he thought, "this dust
of that fire."*

Such is an indication of the movement of the verse, of its predominating tone. Jeffers, come as he says from "the west of the world, where hardly/Anything has died yet," feels the overpowering burden of mortality in what we call older lands. And yet his mood does not seem to us altogether new. He is in love with rock, with monumental silence, and if not precisely in love with death his only way of seeing life is in terms of the colossal cruelty of nature and the mad drama of human passions or the twisted futility of human endeavor. One must have a rather strong stomach for life not to be too heavily depressed by his view of life. It is one view. I recently read *Cawdor* for the first time, and it seemed to us characteristic of this poet that only the caged eagle in it begot in the poem a superb lyrical passage descriptive of the flight of its spirit after death. The dead kings of Ireland appeal to him as the dead eagle appealed, dead things of ravage, men of blood. The cruelty of nature deeply attracts him. It is, in fact, his obsession. This and the uncontrolled passions of humanity certainly still make, as they have always made, for the most powerful dramatic poetry. The story of "Macbeth" is a wonderfully imagined primitive story of murder. The "tragedy of blood" is a commonplace as the basis of the greatest Elizabethan drama. *Cawdor*, at the end of that poem, slashes sight from his own eyes, having killed his son. The Greeks derived great drama from incest and physical violence. As a dramatic poet, Jeffers moves in the most primitive tradition. So far as his rhythmic utterance goes,

the feeling still persists in me that Jeffers's manner has for the most part been too loose and prolix. Given a short section of any Jeffers poem I think I could recognize his authorship without having any other indication that he had written it. But I am not sure. There are passages so intensely imbued with his own individuality that one could not mistake them for the work of anyone else. There is often essential form. And, as often, to me, there is not. It is not a question of his notably long line, nor a question of the absence of strict metrical form as distinguished from inherent rhythm. One wrestles with a Proteus so far as his style is concerned. This constitutes my doubt about the man as a great poet, for he certainly possesses certain qualities of greatness. We have to judge him by higher standards than we apply to most poets. The range of his pondering and the power of his language necessitate that. This handful of present poems is but an "aside" compared with the main body of his work, but it has led me into these speculations. Whatever may be the truth he is one of the most striking poets of our period.

It is easy to agree with a quoted comment of May Sinclair's that "H. D.'s position in literature is secure." I have spoken above of the long plangent line of Robinson Jeffers. In the poems in "H. D.'s" newest volume, *Red Roses for Bronze* (Houghton Mifflin), the line is curt, quick, nervous, full of crisp repetitive enfoldments, lyrical almost to the pitch of piping. It would be stating the obvious to say that it is beautiful, to say that it is accomplished. The renderings of Greek choruses only convince us the more of her skill as an artist, and over and above this of her ability to breathe life into what in most translations remains dead. Take this in "From Morpheus":

*O I am tired of measures
like deft oars:
the beat and ringing
of majestic song;
give me your poppies;
I would lie along
hot rocks, listening;
still my ambition
that would rear and chafe
like chariot horses
waiting for the race;
let me forget
the spears of Marathon.*

One of the most beautiful lyrics of our time shines in number four of the "Songs from Cyprus." It has haunted me long. And the ten poems in "Halcyon" constitute a sequence as sophisticatedly poignant as may be, written with a kind of divine informality. There are other sequences, the title-giving one, "In the Rain," "Chance Meeting," and "Sigil," delicately wrought in frost, yet breathing warm life. Number three of "Chance Meeting" is a particularly exquisite poem. Number four of "Sigil" touches frail perfection. In "Epitaph" the poet says something that, because of her persisting intention, may one day come to be said of her:

*"Greek flower; Greek ecstasy
reclaims for ever*

*one who died
following
intricate songs' lost measure."*

The prosodic accomplishment of "H. D." is not inconsiderable. If we tire somewhat of rose and myrtle, cyclamen and asphodel, it is yet a tribute to this poet that she somehow manages perennially to refresh her garlands. If we set this particular book against her other books we cannot say that it much enlarges her range, that it adds much to what we know of her. But it is most certainly not all in one key. It displays variety. And it is Galatea-marble. Just as we think that the flower is folding into stone, the quivering of intense life is apparent in the petals.

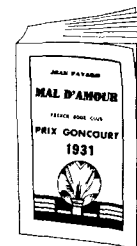
The Palazzo Rezzonico at Venice, where Browning once lived, has been bought by the municipality and is to become a museum of eighteenth-century art, according to *John o' London's Weekly*. After Browning's death his son lived there for a time, and later the building was divided into flats.

The subject for next year's Newdigate Prize is to be Sir Walter Scott.

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Mal d'Amour, Prix Goncourt 1931 is the French Book Club's January volume.

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