

The Saturday Review

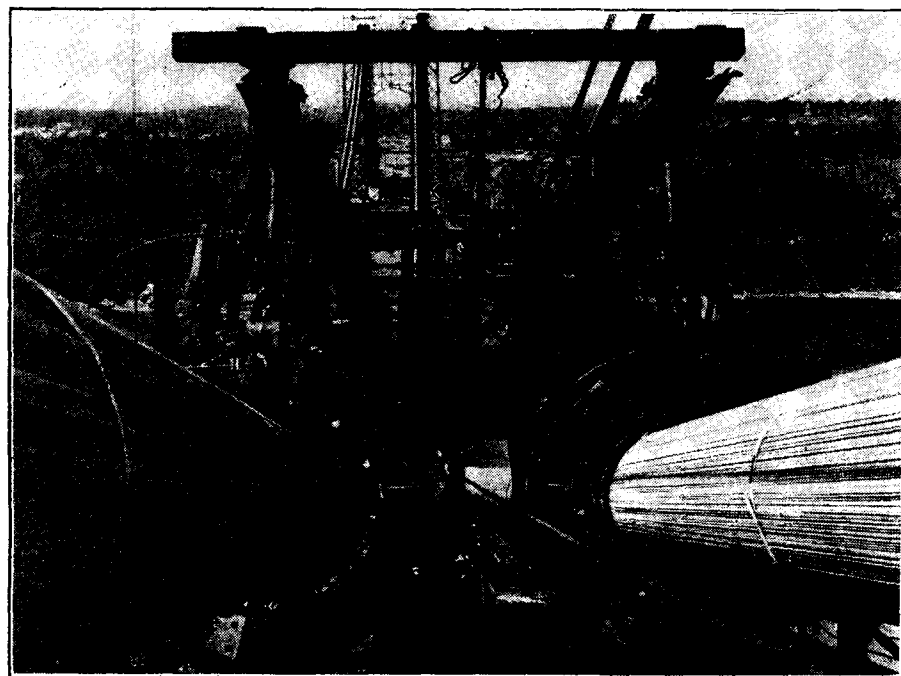
of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

VOLUME VIII

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, MARCH 12, 1932

NUMBER 34



Courtesy, Port of New York Authority

"Cut-Throat Bandits!"

AND so Dr. Sirovich (who once had a play "panned") and his Congressional Committee have summoned the dramatic critics to Washington to be investigated, since it seems that they have ruined the theatrical business by telling the public that 80 per cent of the plays are bad. But this is as good as proof that we are living in a vigorous age of literature! Every virile period has reviled its critics—worms, dogs, venal species, malicious cats, dyspeptics, gall stones, cankered and envious fools, "those cut-throat bandits on the paths of fame—are a few of the milder names by which they have been called. Poor piddling Theobalds, they have always been responsible for everything wrong in art. Jeffrey, Sydney Smith said, had been known to criticize even the equator!

A novelty in this proposed investigation is supplied by the Congressman from Texas who suggests that the critics be given a spelling test from the "old blue spelling book." As lawyers must know law, and doctors medicine, so critics must learn to spell before they practice! But spelling is almost the only accomplishment that has always been credited to them. There is one of the New York faculty who is, as it happens, one of the worst spellers in the world, but unfortunately for the rest of the argument he is also one of the most erudite of critics, holds a doctor's degree from a good university, and is an authority on the history of criticism as well as on the history of drama. The old blue spelling book will floor him, and what good will that do!

This Congressional Committee on patents is just three years too late. They are still thinking, like several more important Congressional Committees, in terms of 1929. Then, in those gross days, all criticism was deemed dangerous. Boast was the word. If stocks went down it was because someone was rash enough to say that they were too high. If apartments did not rent at a double price it was because some fool was criticizing the new standard of living in New York. If the farmers stopped buying it was because the wicked democrats were criticizing the tariff. If the preachers and the intellectuals criticized two-car, three-tub life, it was because they were too lazy to hustle

like the rest of us. And even publishers were heard to say that if their biographies and fiction did not sell by the hundreds of thousands, it was because the critics lacked the spirit of coöperation shown by the beauties who testified to the virtues of cigarettes, or the copy writers for the automobile and refrigerator advertisements.

Of course critics are sometimes malicious, but much more often "smart," in the good old American sense of the word. They suffer (and particularly the dramatic critics, who have to take solo parts) from forms of exhibitionism. They do rejoice with an unholy rejoicing over a thoroughly bad play (as Dr. Sirovich's seems to have been) because it gives them an unexampled chance to be witty. They do, some of them, hold up their own shining phrases in comparison with what they quote from the obviously duller author. But how helpless people of any taste and discrimination would be without them is shown by the present state of the radio. The incredible tripe mixed with really offensive advertising which blares nine hours out of ten from any radio left on, indicates just what happens to every public performance that for one reason or

(Continued on page 584)

Girl and Wind

By LAURA BENÉT

WIND only, of her few and deepening loves
Bidden to intimacy,
Divines her thought as do
the mourning doves,—
The heavily golden bee.

Wind, elfin fugitive, exacts no vow.
Of the same blood, these twain go wandering.

Wan, orphan souls touched by that murmuring bough
Shading a primal spring.

Wind ever changing, changes not: her feet
Skimming new worlds as casual birds the sky,
Grow heavy: she becomes an alien sweet,
Elusive, shy.

But with the summer evening she will stray
Beyond a garden's dropping scent to find
Spaces forsaken by the rout of day
Summoning her pale wind.

Instrument or Frankenstein?*

By JOHN DEWEY

IT is a familiar saying that the great intellectual work of the nineteenth century was the discovery of history. The idea of evolution was an extension of its discovery of history, evolution but stretching history to its limit of elasticity. As we notice the shift of emphasis and interest which is now going on we may question, however, whether the familiar saying is more than a half-truth. Would it not be nearer to the truth to say that the nineteenth century discovered *past* history? Since what is characteristic of the present time is speculation about the future, perhaps it will be the task of the twentieth century to discover *future* history. Even more significant than our anxious preoccupation with the question of "Whither Mankind?" is the fact that so early in the century the idea of planning has taken possession of the imagination. There are many points of view from which the Victorian age may be regarded, and as many corresponding definitions of its essence. One of these definitions, at least as true as the others, is that it regarded the present as the culmination, the apogee, of the past. Hence its complacency. Today we think of the present as the preparation for a future; hence our disturbed uncertainty.

The contrast between history which is past and history which is future, together with the reaction upon present mood and attitude of the sense of this contrast, might be carried, without forcing, to the interpretation of many characteristic movements. "Evolution" has ceased to be the unwinding of what is already rolled up on the reel of destiny, an unfolding of the leaves of a scroll, and the rendering visible of passages inscribed at the beginning in a secret indelible ink. The introduction of the idea of mutation marks nothing less than a revolution in our entire scheme of interpretation. What also is the notion of emergent evolution save recognition of the novel, unexpected, unpredictable? Nor do I think it fanciful to say that the domination of social thought in the nineteenth century by the idea of *laissez-faire* was a practical tribute to the sway exercised by history as past, just as the importance of the idea of planning is our tribute to history as future. Instead of thinking of ourselves, of our institutions and laws, as effects, we are beginning to think of ourselves and of them as potential causes.

The preoccupation of so much of contemporary thought with the machine and its technology finds its place in the problem of the relation of past and future history. It also gives striking evidence that the force of nineteenth century thought is still with us; that we are still far removed from any universally shared apprehension of the machine in terms of what we can do with it. The more vocal contemporary part of thought still thinks of the machine as something outside of human purpose, as a force proceeding from the past and bound to sweep on and carry us whither it will. As yet, the most obvious sign of change from the nineteenth century temper is the transformation of pæans into lamentations. Instead of jubilation because the machine is sure to usher us automatically into a promised

land, we now have the jeremiad that it is sure to land us in waste lands.

But even with respect to the machine, to technology, and the industrial operations which have accompanied the machine, there are signs of a change of attitude. There are an increasing number who remind us that after all the machine was invented and constructed by man, that it is used by man, and that man will be its creature instead of its creator only just as long as he chooses that role for himself. There was no trait of our late prosperity and the "new economic era" more amusing, except that it was alarming, than the assumption so loudly trumpeted by those accepted as leaders that at last we had attained a constantly expanding régime of production equated to consumption which was automatically guaranteed to continue by some inherent process. The tragic collapse of the fact has reacted somewhat—though not as much as one would expect—against the theory. But one may fairly say that at least the problem is now raised. Must man helplessly abdicate before his own production? Can human beings check the tendencies of industrialization which have swept us along for a generation? Can we arrest machine industry at the point of reasonable subordination to other interests, and then turn it to account as a servant of other values? Or are we enslaved by some necessary inescapable cosmic force?

Spengler's little book, "Man and Technics," both belongs and does not belong to the class of books in which is raised this fundamental issue. He has a vivid sense of the importance of "technics"; he has a much clearer grasp on their nature than most writers. He heartily accepts the idea of mutation; everything decisive in world history has happened suddenly, without warning. He is temperamentally against evolution by gradual cumulative changes; they are too tame and domesticated for him; he demands something dramatic in the way of change. He also sees how fully the issue of our present

This Week

"HIDDEN SPRINGS OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION."

Reviewed by MANYA GORDON.

"THREE GOOD GIANTS."

Reviewed by E. PRESTON DARGAN.

"EXPRESSION IN AMERICA."

Reviewed by LUDWIG LEWISOHN.

"DECATUR."

Reviewed by FLETCHER PRATT.

"ONE WAY TO HEAVEN."

Reviewed by MARTHA GRUENING.

"MARIETTA."

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT.

"IMAGINED CORNERS."

Reviewed by ROBERT CANTWELL.

"MAGNOLIA STREET."

Reviewed by GEORGE MOREBY ACKLOM.

THE FOLDER.

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

Next Week, or Later

WHITMAN AND THE BROOKLYN TIMES.

By EMORY HALLOWAY.

* Man and Technics. By Oswald Spengler. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1932. \$2.

culture is bound up with what happens to our machine technology. But his analysis and his prophecy are couched wholly in terms of something called destiny. He sees life and history as an inspired oracle of old might have conceived a Greek tragedy of fate, if the oracle had also been gifted with the potentially vast audience of that modern oracle, the publicity agent. For Spengler fairly press-agents Doom, and in the end his technic becomes a mere puppet playing the part assigned to it in the tragedy of destiny.

The volume was originally conceived as an account of prehistoric times; as a story of origins told after the method and manner of "The Decline of the West." The canvas has been reduced in order to be accommodated to the vision of the reader who is unfitted to grasp the whole scene in the total grandiose pictorial form in which it appears in the "Decline." Reference to early epochs coming before the age of "High Cultures" remains, but it is now set forth as the first act of the drama which fate is playing with mankind.

A few ideas, strikingly stated, dominate the volume. Technics is not to be identified with the machine or even with the implement and tool. It covers all the ways in which a fighting animal contends with its environment striving to get the better of it as an adversary. It is exemplified equally when the word is used as a weapon (as by the diplomat) and when stalking is employed by the lion. In every technique, things are subordinated to purposive activity, to an idea. Machines are no part of mere economics because they are simply means in the universal conflict of man with nature. The importance of technics in culture was totally overlooked until the nineteenth century. Culture has been supposed in the entire literary and philosophic tradition to be something elevated far above the machine; this tradition measured culture in terms of books, pictures by idealists and ideologues.

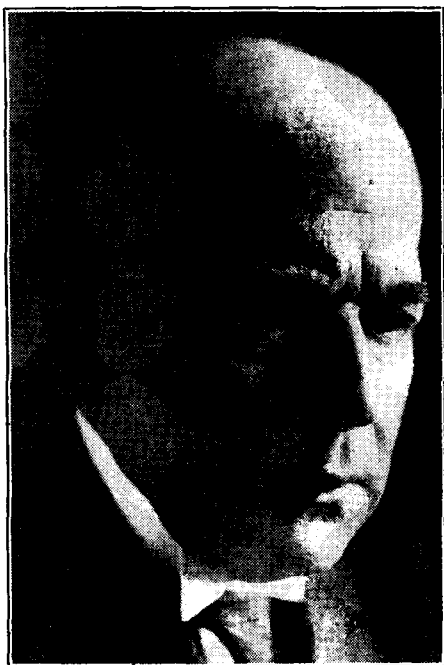
The utilitarian, materialistic, socialist movement of the nineteenth century corrected this error but only to fall into a shallower one. It thought of the machine as the means by which the ease and comfort of humanity were surely to be achieved; its ideal was a devastating state of tranquillity which Spengler describes in terms which remind one of William James's account of the tedium of the eternal tea-party with which the millennium has been identified. Man being a beast of prey, his technics, including the machine, is the armory from which are drawn the weapons with which man fights nature. Since every work of man is artificial, the machine is unnatural, an act of rebellion, of intentional mariticide. The higher a culture, the greater is the rift between man and nature, and the more must man become the bitter enemy of nature. Since nature is the stronger, every culture is a defeat: the destiny of tragic doom is within it.

The machine is simply the most powerful of the weapons of man in his combat with nature. But it has created a whole series of tensions in the life of man; tensions between the few leaders and the mass which is led; between the processes of work and its results; between the industrialized nations and the rest of the world; between life and organization, since vital things are dying in the grip of mechanical organization. The machine is failing even from the standpoint of economy or production. In consequence, man is in revolt against the machine which has enslaved him. The knell of this machine culture is sounded, and with its doom there is enacted another act in the tragic destiny of mankind. But to this doom we were born. It is as cowardly as it is futile to strive to resist it and to divert the course of history. What we can do is to perish heroically; or, as a correspondent of mine has put it, we can "wade in chin high" to meet the destroying flood.

I am quite aware that a summary like the one which I have just given may appear like a parody, although it is as faithful an epitome as space permits. But this book indicates what many readers of Spengler's earlier book must have suspected, that the real significance of his work does not lie at all where he himself conceives it to lie but somewhere else. In

other words, Mr. Spengler's vast generalizations have a fustian quality. They are rhetorical rather than eloquent; they are tags pasted on, rather than convictions growing directly from the material dealt with. Mr. Spengler has real strength. But it lies in swift, penetrating, incidental remarks. There are a dozen insights in this little volume which are rare and precious. But they have almost nothing to do with the march of any argument; they do not support his final conclusions; they can be converted to many another intellectual use than that which their author makes of them.

It is a pity that Spengler's passion for sparks and glitter is so great. He raises a real problem; he says many things which will have to be taken into account in its solution. But it is extremely doubtful whether many readers will carry from the book the intellectual provocation which a less partisan book might have given. He is committed in advance to write history as a high tragedy, moving from catastrophe to catastrophe on an ever vaster scale. He is committed to



OSWALD SPENGLER.

looking at all attempts to plan for the future so as to divert forces now operating into more humane channels, with contemptuous indifference. He is a learned German Mencken, but with an obsession that he was born to write high tragedy instead of to be amused at the spectacle of human folly and stupidity. Hence it is that he belongs and does not belong among the thinkers who realize that the most important problem of the present is what we are to do with the new techniques which have come with the advent of the machine. He perceives that the present age is what it is because of the new technology, but his discussion is completely controlled by his concern with destiny and doom. It is, of course, conceivable that the present culture is to collapse; in its present economic form it surely will in time—and probably with only a few to mourn it. But the total destruction because of machine technology of all factors in civilization will occur only if all the rest of us—from levity and routine rather than from a sense of tragedy—agree with Spengler that human desire and thought are impotent. It does not help to say that we are completely in the grip of an overwhelming cosmic force, when in reality we are faced with the problem of what we are to do with a tool we have ourselves created.

John Dewey, professor of philosophy at Columbia University, is one of the leading philosophers and educators of the country. Among his many publications are "German Philosophy and Politics," "Human Nature and Conduct," and "The Public and Its Problems."

"Edgar Wallace," says the London Observer, "was a strange and, in his way, a startling portent in literature. In his fertility, resourcefulness, and efficiency, he represented Fleet Street rather than Parnassus, and one sometimes got the impression that he had taken to detective fiction as the least harassing and best-paid form of journalism."

Babushka

HIDDEN SPRINGS OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: Personal Memoirs of Katerina Breshkovskaia. Edited by LINCOLN HUTCHINSON. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press. 1931. \$5.

Reviewed by MANYA GORDON

KATERINA BRESHKOVSKAIA is known and loved the world over, but, barring Russia, she has nowhere as many devoted friends and admirers as in the United States. These remember her as the Little Grandmother of the Russian Revolution who came to America in 1906 after having spent thirty years in prison and exile and who here pleaded so eloquently the cause of unhappy Russia. They will be grateful for the privilege of renewing their acquaintance with her work and aspirations in the pages of "Hidden Springs of the Russian Revolution" which embodies her personal recollections.

It is a most valuable human and historic contribution. Born in 1844, seventeen years before the abolition of serfdom, Breshkovskaia as the daughter of a nobleman landowner became conscious at a very early age of the prevalent system of injustice and oppression. Her father was a liberal and not unkind to his serfs, but she spent her girlhood in an atmosphere wherein humiliations, flogging, and other tortures comprised the normal existence of the serfs. The misery of the Russian masses aroused in her a contempt for their oppressors and a burning desire to help them throw off their shackles. However, her initial effort was not revolutionary, but purely educational. All that was necessary, thought Breshkovskaia and her fellow idealists of "The People's Will" who later organized the Socialist Revolutionary Party, was to instruct the masses, and liberation would follow. For a brief period she devoted herself to teaching the peasant to read and write.

The abolition of serfdom in 1861 severed the chains that tied the peasant to the landowner's estate, gave him a certain measure of freedom, and endowed him with a small strip of land. He was no longer a "soul" to be used by his master in the manner of all other domestic animals, though not as well cared for. Nevertheless, he was still a decidedly poor soul. The dvorovye, peasants of the household squad, who during serfdom had no land assigned to them, remained homeless and landless, and the amount of land received by the other peasants was quite inadequate. They continued to be an object of oppression and pity. The Czar had done his bit and refused to go any further.

It was this state of utter despair that drove such hitherto ardent advocates of a pacific educational program as Zheliabov, Perovskaia, who later planned the assassination of Alexander II, Breshkovskaia, and her other fellow reformers, first to underground methods and subsequently to terrorism, and brought about the assassination of Alexander II. His successor, Alexander III, ushered in a period of reaction. He ordered the closing of the rural schools which had been created by Breshkovskaia and other civic-minded Russians. This unfortunate gesture on the part of the monarch completed the Chinese wall which separated the Russian autocracy from the Russian people.

Breshkovskaia's memoirs deal essentially with the storming of this wall by the Russian masses. Its complete destruction required very nearly a century of unceasing labor (counting back to the Decembrist movement of 1825), supreme idealism, self-sacrifice, bloodshed, and that without which all the preceding factors would have been unsuccessful—an almost fantastic optimism, and an invincible faith in the people's right and in the successful consummation of the struggle. Those who have been recently quarreling with democracy, and are harking back to the magic power of autocratic rule as a cure-all, will profit from a perusal of "Hidden Springs of the Russian Revolution" as a testimonial of democratic faith.

January 28th last was Breshkovskaia's eighty-eighth birthday. All her active life was spent in the service of the Russian people, the greater part in prison or in

Siberian exile. She therefore writes as an untiring worker and eyewitness in the conflict. Breshkovskaia has had first-hand experience of the wisdom, the generosity, the sincerity of autocratic rule. She has endured the heavy hand of autocracy, both Czarist and Bolshevik. Her observations are not the reflections of a closet philosopher, or a sensation-seeking journalist, but the offspring of more than a half a century of continuous contact with despotism and the evil it breeds. Her case proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that revolutionists are not born such, but are created by the very power which would destroy them. Beginning with the Decembrists in 1825, the Romanoff dynasty had been busy exterminating the best men and women of Russia in an effort to stem the rising tide of enlightenment and democracy. But the effort was in vain. For every revolutionist who fell a hundred others arose who carried on until their task was completed by the March Revolution of 1917, and the fall of Czarism.

In describing the conditions which precipitated the collapse of the Romanoff dynasty, and later the Bolshevik coup d'état and the fall of the Provisional Government under Kerensky, who, incidentally, has written the foreword to the present volume, Breshkovskaia is neither partisan nor bitter. Although she was the first to introduce the name of the Socialist Revolutionary Party at the famous trial of the 193 revolutionists in 1877-1878, she has been too deeply interested in the complete liberation of the Russian people to think in terms of party. There is not the slightest trace of rancor in the narrative. The author's reaction to the personal and historic events which she records are akin to those of a great surgeon who, after much effort and anxiety, has successfully removed a malignant tumor and knows that his patient is still quite ill, but is certain of his ultimate recovery.

As was to be expected, Breshkovskaia's personal recollections are incomplete in so far as a detailed portrayal of her own personal history is concerned. She is too modest to turn the spotlight on the treasures of courage, kindness, energy, faith, and devotion which she embodies. The assembling of these rare characteristics into a complete portrait she has left to her future biographers. In the present volume she describes her political and revolutionary activities only. However, the very manner of her narrative sufficiently reveals the simplicity, candor, and sensitive reaction to the most simple gesture of kindness, no matter whether bestowed by friend or foe. Her lack of interest in herself is balanced by the enthusiasm and affection conveyed in her descriptions of her fellow revolutionists. The fascinating profiles which she has thus created shine radiantly in the misery and drabness of Czarist Russia. It is a privilege to make the acquaintance of these great men and women if only in the page. They renew one's faith in man. A number of Breshkovskaia's revolutionary friends, such as Chaikovsky, Peter Kropotkin, Zheliabov, Perovskaia, Zasulich, Vera Figner, etc. (Vera Figner is still active in Moscow as a member of the Red Cross for political prisoners) are not unknown to the American reading public. They have been described before, but never with the charm and tenderness of the present volume. Breshkovskaia envisages her fighting sisters of the Revolution in heroic guise: "Our Valkyries in their mighty flight above the earth rode on clouds that were bathed in the light of faith in man," she writes. And her faith in man remains unshaken by her recent disappointments. She continues firm in the belief that the beacon of liberty, fraternity, and enlightenment which she helped to kindle will never be extinguished in Russia.

The footnotes of the volume are complete and most helpful and the translation excellent.

New facts pertaining to the administration of President Hayes covered by Dr. George F. professor of history in the Liberal Arts, University of Chicago, going through material in the Memorial Museum and Library, Ohio.