

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

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### Economics and Art

WE have heard much of "pure" poetry and "intellectual" poetry in the last few years, —why not "pure" fiction and intellectualism in the novel? The reply is that of course we have had them, and for a very good reason. The novels of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson, and of Henry James before all of them, represent the capture of fiction by the sophisticated intellect absorbed in the give and take of analysis. In these books the umbilical cord which joins them to a given locale is often atrophied. Who cares, except Irishmen, that "Ulysses" is a tale of Dublin! As for the "pure" novel, what else are the later stories of Willa Cather, or the fantasies of David Garnett and Robert Nathan and Thornton Wilder? The attempt has been to escape from plot, from strictly contemporary reference, from the warp of an imagination too much influenced by the pull of immediate environment. "Death Comes for the Archbishop" is more than historic chronicle, yet it perfects its chrysolite of the imagination by a conscious choice of a different culture from ours. Even so George Moore argued that "pure" poetry should divest itself of ideas or description which might entangle it in the fabric of merely current thinking.

Such choices, especially when made by artists of real power and originality, are not haphazard. They must be reactions from some strong impulse prejudicial either to the art of those writers or to art in general. And how evident it is, once the mind begins to run in this direction, that an obsession does exist. We are all caught by it, all swung away by it from our old curves of thinking. For this is the age of economics.

Not economics by any exact, scientific definition. The shift in attention is much more subtle than that. For while the means of a livelihood have always been a theme for literature it is only since the war that the economic interpretation of history (which means the effect upon every aspect of life, from religion to war, of the organization of agriculture, industry, and trade) has entered everyone's consciousness and become therefore such a dominating emotion as were political rights in the last century.

This is to state the obvious, but it is not so obvious that a whole generation of writers, especially in fiction, has been carried away by this obsession, their interests shifted, their ideas colored, their subjects determined, their detachment as artists from the scene they were describing for us markedly lessened.

It is interesting to note at this point that the Soviet authorities are said to be much dissatisfied with the novels being written with the class struggle as a basis. Dreiser does not please them, Dos Passos is admonished to keep the only true interpretation of society in mind, their own novelists are criticized because with such a magnificent theme they do not shake down the reputations of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. They recognize the obsession which has made so many of the considerable novels of our period tracts in the emotional interpretation of economics, without understanding the true reason for the artist's obsession with themes which seem to them the only important ones. They classify fiction as good communism or bad, which is like classing novels as good because they are democratic or bad

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ENGRAVING BY HENRY LEWIS FROM "DAS ILLUSTRIRTE MISSISSIPPIHAL."  
Courtesy the Macaulay Co.

### Prophet, Pedant and Pioneer\*

By LEWIS MUMFORD

THE new and revised edition of Mr. Van Wyck Brooks's study of Mark Twain comes at the right moment. Within the last year Mr. Brooks's biographical method, his interpretation of Mark Twain, and his picture of the pioneer have all been called into question by Mr. Bernard De Voto, the author of "Mark Twain's America." Since many people will read Mr. Brooks's critics without having read "The Ordeal of Mark Twain" itself, and since Mr. De Voto has done something less than justice to Mr. Brooks in his citation from his work, it is good to have "The Ordeal" itself, now a dozen years old, plainly before us.

The first point to get clear about "The Ordeal of Mark Twain" is that it is not a full-length biography or a literary criticism but a study in character. What was Mr. Brooks's problem? He posed it in the first chapter. Here is a writer of magnetic personality and every appearance of exceptional ability, a man whose mind is clear and steady and sharp, a man of nobler stature than most of the people around him: one of those men of letters who seem born, like Hugo or Tolstoy, to be leaders of the race.

When one examines Mark Twain's work as a writer what does one find? One finds two juicy books about boys' life, the better of which, the immortal "Huckleberry Finn," is weakened by a tawdry and preposterous conclusion; one finds a satire about life in the "Court of King Arthur," written from a standpoint scarcely to be differentiated from the "Connecticut Yankee" who is the hero of the tale; one finds the first few chapters of the book about "Life on the Mississippi," and beyond these items a succession of essays, stories, travel books, most of them of third or fourth rank, saved from immediate oblivion by the aroma of the author's personality.

Not merely as a writer but as a man Mark Twain seems a small, spoiled effigy of the person he might have been. He hates the shams and hypocrisies of our society, but when he attacks them he usually pulls his punches: he dislikes the tame conventions of his Victorian contempora-

\*The Ordeal of Mark Twain. By VAN WYCK BROOKS. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1933. \$3.75.

ries, but when he challenges them, he does so in secret, like a little boy writing a dirty word on the back of a fence. He has the nation, almost the world, at his feet; but he accepts none of the intellectual and moral responsibilities of this situation. Holding the desires and standards of his public sacred, he is content merely to tickle the ribs of his contemporaries. His standards of personal success are precisely those of a miner in Nevada or a business man in Wall Street. Finally, this humorist, who has ridden from one literary triumph to another, ends his life on a note of black and bitter despair.

Whatever one may say of such a man, he is surely not a simple character, and the mood of psychological innocence in which his official biographer approached him left much to be plumbed. Mr. Van Wyck Brooks set out to study the elements in Mark Twain's background and in his personal relations and choices that helped create this baffling mixture of achievement and ineptitude, grandeur and crassness, humanity and vulgarity, humor and stupid buffoonery that was Mark Twain. It was an unexplored territory. Before Mr. Brooks entered it Mark Twain had been enlarged into a myth without being appraised as a man.

Mr. Bernard De Voto has taken exception to Mr. Brooks's study on three grounds. First: there is no problem. Second: the psychological method employed by Mr. Brooks is too dangerous, his application of it is slippery, and the interpretation he arrives at is unimportant. Third: Mr. Brooks knows nothing whatever about Mark Twain's America, and particularly about the pioneer life of the frontier.

Let us dismiss the first ground. Mr. De Voto, who accepts his hero naïvely, merely means that there is no problem for him.

As for the second, I admit the dangers. Human character is a complex and thorny subject for any kind of analysis, and only those who have a special flair for it should risk their necks in treating it. No life is more than half explicable, even to him who lives it and reflects upon it, and although psychological observation is doubtless one of the oldest amusements of

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### Yankee Yeomanry

AS THE EARTH TURNS. By GLADYS HASTY CARROLL. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1933. \$2.50.

Reviewed by DONALD DAVIDSON

ALTHOUGH I have never lived on a Maine farm like that described in Miss Carroll's excellent novel, I know the people of whom she writes. They belong to that old republic of independent farmers whom Thomas Jefferson considered the foundation of democracy. In these Maine folk, so unaffectedly depicted, appear again the indubitable Yankees, cousins of the yeomanry of Piedmont and Prairie. It is good to see their ruddy features emerge through the socialistic pallor of our times. They were said to be lost; now that by such amazing grace they are found, I am led into retrospect.

When I went to school in Tennessee a good many years ago, Southern boys were studying "Snowbound" in ninety degree temperatures and declaiming "The Barefoot Boy" along with "The Conquered Banner" on Friday afternoons. Even among us Confederates, the New England rural tradition was something to learn by heart, like the battles of Lee or the English kings. Later on it was disconcerting to be told, in books fresh from New York, that New England farm life was wholly evil where it was not extinct. In fact, all country folks had turned into yokels, to whom our novelists were recommending liberalism and tonsillectomy. Yet how strange that country people were yokels only in the United States; in Hamsun's Norway or Yeats's Ireland they were very engaging persons. And what was one to do with Robert Frost, who persisted in liking the New England countryside, although he made up dark sayings to the effect that "One had to be versed in country things, Not to believe the phoebes wept."

I take Miss Carroll's novel as a powerful sign that the wheel has gone around. Country folks looked like yokels only so long as city people behaved like cockneys (to borrow Mr. Canby's phrase in "American Estimates"). From the tedious urban uniformity of America the Menace, we are returning to a rural and sectional diversity that was there all the time. The earth is good, not only in Pearl Buck's China or in the agrarian Mexico to which

### This Week

ANDANTE.

By KATHARINE SHEPARD HAYDEN.

MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY.

Reviewed by ALEXANDER GOLDENWEISER.

DAVID HUME.

Reviewed by W. R. DENNES.

E. H. HARRIMAN.

Reviewed by JOHN CHAMBERLAIN.

NOTES WITH A YELLOW PEN. II.

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

"CARAVAN CITIES."

Reviewed by ARTHUR DARBY NOCK.

"THE BIRDS OF MINNESOTA."

Reviewed by SAMUEL SCOVILLE, JR.

### Next Week, or Later

"THE MODERN CORPORATION AND PRIVATE PROPERTY."

Reviewed by HENRY BRUERE.



Stuart Chase made a cockney pilgrimage, but right here.

Miss Carroll does not react to the extreme of converting the Maine farm people into Noble Savages. In general, they are unreconstructed Yankees, but they have a high degree of individual particularity. With admirable completeness she puts a number of individuals before us, and through them conveys the temper of life of a Maine family from one winter to the next. Their triumphs are modest—a good harvest, a fortunate marriage, the little success of this son or that daughter; and their sorrows are in the course of nature. I have not read many novels in which background and human character are so well fused, without extravagance in either direction. This balance comes ne-



GLADYS HASTY CARROLL.

cessarily from an intimate understanding of what a Maine farm is like. The temper of this life is happy; its satisfactions and disappointments are not dissociated from the day's work and the detail of surroundings. Thus the novel becomes a genuine moral, which neither idealizes nor proscribes, but simply gives its pleasant Maine vision of "the mean and sure estate."

The dominating figure is the girl Jen, a nineteen-year-old Ceres who is cook, housekeeper, and mother-confessor to the Shaw household. Jen flinches at nothing; she takes life easy, but diligently. To her kitchen, where all is shipshape and comfortable, the family come for sustenance, physical and spiritual: the stepmother, with her old woman's miseries; the younger children, with their school talk; the brothers and sisters and stepsisters and "in-laws." Jen knows how to manage them just as she knows how to get a dinner on the table hot. Jen knows why the nature of Lois May pulls her toward the city, and why bookish Olly had better go to college than farm; and what is to be done between ne'er-do-well George and his distracted wife; and how to manage Ed's wedding; and what is needful for tight-lipped father Shaw, who likes to have his children around but will never "hold them back." Better than anyone else in the family, Jen fulfils her father's wish for an ideal son: "One who would listen, not too smart nor too impatient nor too proud to learn what his land could teach him as the earth turned slowly round the sun." At the end, Jen's acceptance of the wooing of Stan Janowski, the young Polish farmer who has moved into the sparsely settled neighborhood with his fiddle music and his open ways, seems part of her tolerant accommodation to the realities of earth and of a life that must go on where it knows it belongs.

"As the Earth Turns" has much of the good temper, but less of the lyrical romantic strain than appears in Elizabeth Madox Roberts's Kentucky novels. And her canvas is less ambitious, her scenes are more intimate and domestic than in Willa Cather's works. But she is evidently capable of doing for Maine what such writers have done for regions elsewhere, and in a way so substantial and winning that it cannot be but welcome.

Franz Seldte, the author of a war novel published in English under the title of "Through a Lens Darkly," is the new Labor Minister in Hitler's Cabinet.

## Prophet, Pedant, Pioneer

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the race, progress in the technique of analysis will probably not remove the risks attendant on it. Those who, like Mr. De Voto, had rather be safe than sorry may very well let psychological interpretation alone. When they deny the method to others, however, they are smugly attempting to make their own temperament a final criterion.

At the time Mr. Brooks made his exploration of Mark Twain's character, the psychological method had not been pushed very far in American biography; Mr. Brooks was one of the pioneers in its use. With all his praise of the frontier, Mr. De Voto unfortunately understands the ardors of pioneering only on the plane of the practical life; in intellectual matters he prefers to stay close to the Old Homestead. But the point to remember is that although Mr. Brooks used the convenient vocabulary of the psychoanalyst, his interpretation dealt with phenomena known to all acute students of human nature from Shakespeare to Stendhal; and the real question is, not whether Mr. Brooks's insights and intuitions have a precise scientific basis, but whether they had a valid outcome in understanding.

The question, so far as I am concerned, admits of only one answer: Mr. Brooks made a necessary, painful but necessary, contribution to our understanding both of Mark Twain and ourselves, in so far as we are the products of a similar environment, in so far as we are confronted by similar dilemmas. He himself in his new edition has altered the color and emphasis on certain parts of the picture; but in the main no biographer of Mark Twain who wishes to go beneath the surface can escape his debt to Mr. Brooks. Mr. De Voto has evaded this debt by holding, with massive iteration, that no one should seek to go beneath the surface.

This theory seems to me a puerile one. A biography without psychological interpretation is not a biography at all; for the data of biography, the facts themselves, are one thing, and their arrangement, their relationship, the meaning, though closely dependent on the data, are another matter. To say, as Mr. De Voto recently did in an article in *Harper's*, that the facts are all-important and that a sound biography must contain nothing else is to say that a scarecrow, if it be dressed carefully enough, will serve instead of a man. The truth is one can assemble a thousand facts about a person's existence, all of them verifiable, and create a monstrosity that corresponds to no being that ever lived; while on the other hand, one can have access to half the number of facts, and even err about particular ones, and still present an essentially truthful portrait. The pedant wants to be sure that the facts are right, even if they mean nothing; the genuine biographer wants, above all, to be sure that the interpretation is just and accurate, even should the facts be insufficient.

In general, Mr. De Voto's suspicion of interpretation and generalization of any kind is quite understandable. When he attempts them himself he is almost as reckless, as dogmatic, and as inaccurate as when he is dealing controversially with a personality or a theory he dislikes. But Mr. De Voto hides his weakness from the

casual reader by using the word "facts" to describe his own particular kind of interpretation. Shall I uncharitably offer a few concrete examples? Consider Mr. De Voto's interpretation of the pioneer's westward march. Putting aside all past explanations, he attributes it to a new phenomenon in history: "God's gadfly," he says, "had stung us mad." In describing Mark Twain's America he can say on page 65: "The slaves were happy, the happiest folk in that contented countryside," while he sums up this happiness only eleven pages later, in these words: "The slave's world was dominated by the terror of death. . . . It was a world that stank of death and shuddered with its terror." (It must have been a very contented countryside indeed.)

In still another place, in order to support the notion that all the spiritual weaknesses that have been attributed to the pioneer can be accounted for in terms of hookworm and malaria, Mr. De Voto observes that "a clinical thermometer would have shown about one degree of fever. This was the constant temperature of the population." How did Mr. De Voto, one wonders, achieve this admirably exact observation—by systematic inclusion, by sampling, by questionnaire, by clairvoyance? Does it also explain the pioneer mores in the people of the Mohawk Valley—and in those who wore shoes against the hookworm and did not succumb to malaria? Was it due to anopheles and the hookworm alone—or perhaps to God's gadfly? One grants the existence of the diseases: I merely quarrel with Mr. De Voto's imaginative distribution of them, backed by a hypothetical clinical thermometer. Mr. De Voto's excellent descriptions of frontier life are not ruined for me by the fact that he occasionally commits howlers like these; but they would be if I accepted his principles.

This brings us to the validity of Mr. Brooks's knowledge of the frontier, as opposed to Mr. De Voto's. Mr. Brooks said in effect that the pioneer lived in a barbarous and inadequate environment, which lacked the materials necessary for complete human development, and which even curbed and crippled humane reactions which did not serve the rough life of the frontier. Success in this society was described in material terms, though not everyone attained it; and the canons of success on the frontier, linked up with those of the new industrialism in the East, automatically discouraged those who had more civilized objectives. Mr. De Voto handsomely refutes Mr. Brooks by setting forth the following facts:

First: the remains of the English ballads were still sung in various parts of the West, although, he is honest enough to point out there is no evidence in Mark Twain's works that he had heard them, had remembered them, or had been influenced by them, as he was by the Negro spirituals. Second: asking on page 55, "Is the frontier distinguished for squalor, unimaginable lethargy, filth, repellent social relations, a hideousness of wretched life, the degradation of mankind to a larval form that burrowed protectively into the clay?" He answers: "Unquestionably . . . in part." Third: the frontier was not Calvinist, since it had sports like cock-fighting and jolly barn dances; but the prevailing religion was the religion of the day, namely, Calvinism. Fourth: the notion that frontier life was detestable is an empty literary theory (for counter evidence see De Voto, above) but marauding ruffians hunted river and forest and Mark Twain as a boy, saw various deaths by violence, or the corpses left behind, and through companionship with the Negro he came under the spell of the slave's world and the slave's religion, dominated by superstition and the terror of death. Finally, the notion that this was a materialistic and acquisitive society, with little in its morals or interests to counterbalance the overwhelming preoccupation with getting a bare living or money-making,

is disproved by the existence of travelling theatrical companies, whores in mining camps, and slave songs.

In short, Mr. De Voto "corrects" Mr. Brooks in a book that in itself generously contains enough data to support every item in Mr. Brooks's catalogue of corrections. De Voto is an excellent revolver shot; but if his marksmanship were not better than his disproofs of Mr. Brooks's interpretation of the pioneer he would, under the happy impression that he had hit the bull's eye, have long ago committed suicide.

Now, a considerable amount of searching since "The Ordeal of Mark Twain" was written, has brought to light customs, habits, verses, sayings, stories, which give the historical observer a richer sense of the underlying actuality than he would get by a simple reading of the later frontier writers like Bret Harte and Mark Twain. But Mr. De Voto's notion that his own work in this department gives him any peculiar superiority over Mr. Brooks is mere bounce. For the fact is that nothing that has been brought to the surface materially alters the outlines of the picture: with all his delving, Mr. De Voto is pretty well satisfied with Mark Twain's own description of the West, nor has he shown reason to doubt the descriptions and judgments of other first hand observers.

When Mr. De Voto revolts at Mr. Brooks's description of the West as a desert of human sand and comes pretty close to saying that it was little less than a paradise, he simply proves that the ancient habits of the pioneer are still with us. Was it not with the same straight face and the same fervor of conviction that Mister Scadder pointed to a swamp and tried to convince Martin Chuzzlewit that it was the fine metropolis of New Eden? And when Mr. De Voto describes in detail the "exuberant vitality" or the "robust life" of the West, far from undermining Mr. Brooks's estimate, he sharply confirms it: for the life he pictures with such fidelity is life at a rudimentary animal level, a life that does not rise more than fitfully above the latitude of the spinal column. The point is that Mr. Brooks is a realist



FROM "LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI."

## Andante

By KATHARINE SHEPARD HAYDEN

IS it not strange that of our days of peace  
I do not write a line? The stinging pain  
Of our white rages hurries to release  
In words poured on you like the furious rain  
Loosed from a tempest sky. But our dear hours  
Lie in me like the captured scent of June  
When the wild honeysuckle turns its flowers,  
Myriads of them, to the summer moon!  
I would not break upon night's stillness then  
Except with music. So it is with love—  
All my flowing words are halted when  
I draw within its aura, and I move  
In a soft, shining silence through the fair  
And spacious peace of that enchanted air!