

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

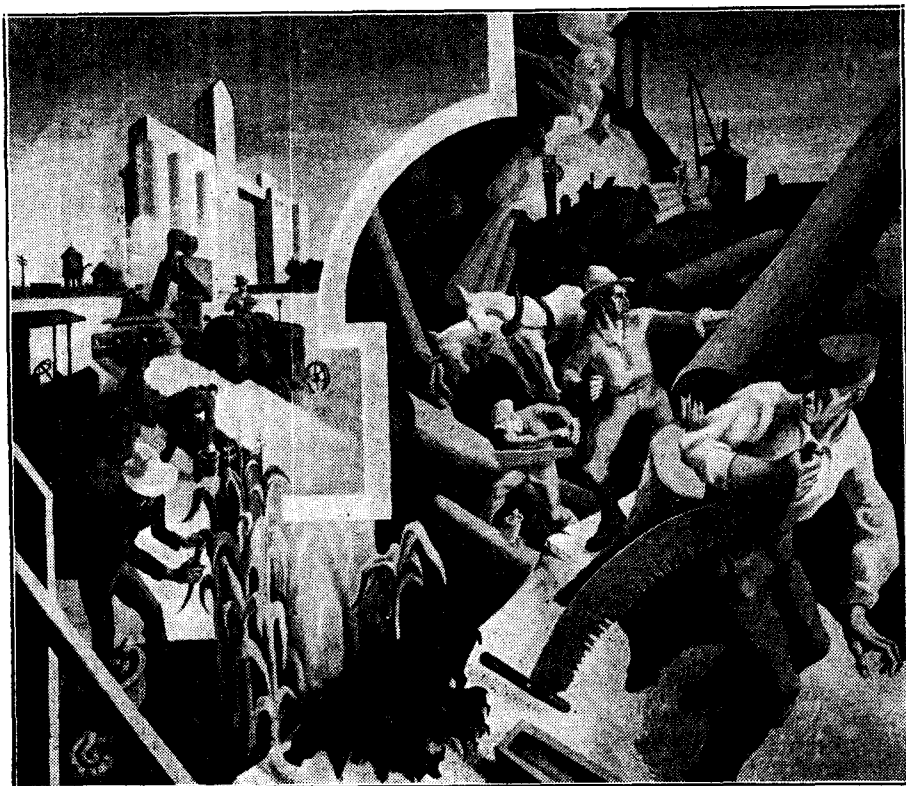
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DETAIL OF A MURAL BY THOMAS H. BENTON, NEW SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH
 "Heroes of the new agrarian novels go back, taking happiness . . . with them."

Reporter de Luxe

WITH MY OWN EYES: A Personal Story of Battle Years. By Frederick Palmer. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1933. \$3.50.

Reviewed by JOHN PALMER GAVIT

HOW far do you imagine Odysseus would have got—would he even have started?—upon his far-and far-flung journey, including hectic seven years with the insatiable Calypso, had he had, and known that he had, a congenital heart-lesion, and a great aneurism, palpable to the dullest touch, in the right carotid artery? Had several expert doctors told him that his place was in a hospital and wheeled-chair with only a few years at most of chronic invalidism to survive; that any strenuous exertion—such for example as pitching one of said doctors out of the window—would settle the business then and there? Despite precisely such a dismal diagnosis in Seattle, substantially confirmed by a telegram from his own doctor in New York, Frederick Palmer started for the Klondike and the gold-rush, as correspondent of the *New York Press*, and went through an experience of physical labor, deprivation, hardship generally, such as would have killed and in fact did kill many a man in supposedly perfect health.

This is the aspect of Palmer's latest book which serves as background to my reading of it. Always, though he himself makes light of and mostly ignores it, I see the dour courage of an indomitable spirit such as Kipling visions in his immortal "If"—"you'll be a Man, my son!" To my mind, no spectacle of bravery, grim or gay, in this tale of high adventure amid the tragi-comedy of wars in far places surpasses or distracts from that of the author himself, calmly defying death. And getting away with it.

He has suffered the fate that Frederic Villiers, the famous war artist and correspondent, prescribed for him in 1895 (he was in his early twenties then): of being known exclusively as a "war-correspondent"; whereas, he was and is, even

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An Exile Returns to Soviet Russia

FIRST TO GO BACK. By Irina Skariatina. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1933. \$2.75.

Reviewed by ARTHUR RUHL

MRS. VICTOR F. BLAKESLEE, born Skariatina, and formerly a Countess Keller, visited Russia with her American husband in 1932. It was her first glimpse of her native land since she left it in 1922, through the intercession of the A.R.A., and she was, she suggests, "the first member of the titled Russian aristocracy, not a Communist, to be allowed to 'go back' legally with a passport viséed by Moscow."

The Blakeslees saw all the usual things included in one of the Intourist grand tours—Leningrad, Moscow, the Crimea and Northern Caucasus, museums, factories, crèches, the sanatoriums of Livadia, the great dam at Dnieprostroy—although Mrs. Blakeslee, of course, needed no interpreter; and her impressions of what she saw are similar to those of many other foreigners who have visited Soviet Russia with an open mind and a willingness to accept the implications of revolution. Indeed, so far as objective reporting goes, Mrs. Blakeslee's narrative is just another "favorable" book about Russia, identical, in substance, with much that has gone before.

But along with this rather routine reporting, this unusual Russian lady introduces, especially in the earlier chapters of her work, subjective material drawn from her own past, and it is this which gives her book individuality and charm. Thus when they visit the Kazan Cathedral in Leningrad, now used as an anti-religious museum, the daughter of General Vladimir Skariatine and of Princess Mary Lobanov of Rostov, goes back to the days of her childhood when she and her parents would pray before the shrine of the miraculous Virgin of Kazan and place their lighted candles there and kneel and bow low until their foreheads touched the cold

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Where Books Are Heading

BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

ARE there any new books? The veteran reader, whose mind treads wearily backward through so many stories retold and histories rewritten, says, no, every book has been written before, there is nothing new under the sun. But of course he is wrong, and even his grumbling is meant to hide the never extinguished hope that in his day, under his tired eyes, some "Candide," some "Hamlet," some "Huckleberry Finn" will burst, trailing tradition after it, but owning its own soul of genius.

He is doubly wrong since, viewed groupwise, all books inevitably and often against their authors' slavish intentions, become perennially new. They reflect willy-nilly a changing imagination in a changing environment. Only the toughest, most resistant of categories, like the sentimental novel, the detective story, and the stereotyped lyric poem, seem to escape for a while the time spirit, but only seem.

And this year time is accelerated. It hung sluggish in the doldrums of last winter, and the books of last year were many of them sluggish. It began to speed in the spring, and now the notation of events is incessant, and the rhythm of change is fast. Already the signs of a new decade multiply in books.

I note this particularly in the novel, by a curious and characteristically negative reaction. Most of the novels published last Fall that were "new," "in touch with the times," "modern," seem old-fashioned already as one looks back. Obscurity is old-fashioned—I mean the pert "go you one further" kind. Sadism, which was so marked in current American fiction just a year or two ago, seems old-fashioned. Brutality, which was getting to be an American habit, seems dilettante and precious, when one remembers the kind that people wrote about before brutality broke loose in Europe. High imaginative work (of which there was very little last year) never goes out, nor does humor, nor romance—witness the great success in "Anthony Adverse" of a picaresque romance modernized only by a frank and vivid realism of detail. But the "trends" and "tendencies" of writing which seemed "significant" last year have got no further, have sunk underground.

This is all negative and neither a criticism of last year's books nor much help in understanding their successors. Yet it is interesting that, in literature, last Fall seems years back. Our compass has swung, our barometer has changed, there is a new feel to the air and to books.

If I am pressed for illustrations I shall cite the sudden staling of novelized biography, the sharp end of any vital interest in photographic fiction of mean life and mean characters, the rush of pamphlets in book form which assume that the old order is dead or dying. Yet I cannot make my point nearly so well by these obvious instances of change as by a school of fiction which seems too humble to serve as an index of mental transformation, and too simple an art to be new and original. It has been given no name that I know. It is not local color, though it is like it. It is regional, but that is only a beginning. If someone had said to our authors, now clean up America lest in the quick alterations of society something very true to experience will be lost, why that would

have accounted for the aim of these novelists, but not for their skill in writing, their real passion, and most of all for the curious change in plot from earlier regional writing about the naive and primitive islanded in an industrial civilization.

I refer to the pastoral stories of place and character which, with books of the sea very much like them, have been well read and well sold in a period of literary depression. I would cite as typical instances, "South Moon Under" (for this tendency has been under way for some seasons), "Dark Moon of March," just published, and perhaps the "Long Pennant" of Oliver La Farge, yet to appear. I choose these titles at random. There are worse and probably better books of the same kind, though these are good. What you get in them is a pre-machine-age life—or at least a pre-mechanized age. The characters are moulded by the soil or the sea, they work in a rhythm which is made by their environment and enjoy this rhythm. Their world of the clipper-ship sea, or the Florida jungles, or the cotton fields, or the down-East farm, is threatened on all sides by mechanisms which they do not fully understand and for which they are not conditioned. In "Dark Moon of March" the hero's life (and the plot of the novel) is just a series of adventurings out toward the mechanized world, with as frequent returnings hurt and baffled. There is always in these books a dramatic struggle of something deeply emotional against sharp forms of energy that cut across or crush.

Now social historians would describe this readily by saying that since we are still passing from an agrarian to an industrial order, these books can be explained as romances of a lost world. The definition is too simple. There is something new in these novels, which may also be economic in its implications, but seems to me to be linked to a deep psychological change. The conflict between city and country has been

This Week

TESTAMENT OF YOUTH

By VERA BRITTAIN

Reviewed by Amy Loveman

NO CASTLE IN SPAIN

By WILLIAM MCFEE

Reviewed by Basil Davenport

THE LOST HORIZON

By JAMES HILTON

Reviewed by George Dangerfield

THEATRE GUYED

By NEWMAN LEVY

Reviewed by Louis Untermeyer

ROCKWELLKENTIANA

Reviewed by Suzanne La Follette

BONFIRE

By DOROTHY CANFIELD

Reviewed by Alvah C. Bessie

AMERICA IN SEARCH OF CULTURE

By WILLIAM A. ORTON

Reviewed by Frank Ernest Hill

FOOTNOTES FOR A CENTENNIAL

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

Next Week or Later

CARLYLE RULES THE REICH

By JOSEPH E. BAKER

dramatized since Theocritus and Virgil. These new novels, however, end differently from the old ones. The country (or is it the soul?) wins. What was a few years ago a literature of escape has become a literature of revolt or of self-denial.

Ten years ago Sinclair Lewis set a pattern for this sort of thing—and the pattern was tragic or pathetic. The moth first sooted its wings, then was scorched to a disagreeable cinder. Writers of the new agrarian books, and the other primitivists who write of the sea, the wilderness, or the savage, are not so sure. At the end of the books their heroes go back to nature—or whatever is its equivalent. They go back—or they cease moving and take to retrospection. They do not like the mechanized world, but instead of being broken by it, or turning intellectual and being nasty about its behavior, they go back to where they came from, taking happiness or at least content with them. And the striking characteristic of the most recent books of this genre is that the authors are quite evidently conscious of dilemma. The efficient outside world is what their characters often want; they do not wish to go back to the primitive; but the price is too high.

Now if you are going to look for social meanings in literature this seems to me a far more fruitful field than the naturalistic slum and factory studies of 1928-1932. There, when you got through, you had a chunk of reasonably authentic sociology and nothing more. But here is something really new—the weak taking on aspects of the strong, the meek inheriting an earth where meekness is safe, progress viewed skeptically not by an advocate of some other kind of progress, but by a mere personality whose most striking attribute is that he has kept and intends to keep a sense of living. It is as much a reversal of the usual order as when Shakespeare's clowns become the only true philosophers.

Does one argue then that the new novels indicate that we are all headed back to the farm? Naturally not. These books argue nothing. Argument is being con-

this year. The distinguishing characteristic of these pamphlets is that in 1933 we have all become radical in the sense that all are ready for change. At last the barrier has been passed where the laboring American writer had to spend half his space in proving that he was a staunch believer in everything said by everybody between Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt before he could begin to discuss realities. Only last week *The Herald Tribune* editorially upheld the proposition that the world never again could become orderly until states gave up some of their sovereignty. Time has speeded here also.

But these pamphlets deal with ideas and programs. The bucolic and marine novels, in sharp contrast to "The Octopus" and other predecessors, do no such thing. They are precursors, I hope and believe, of a new fiction and a new drama that will belong as wholly to the middle 1930s as satire belonged to the turn of the decade. In them one feels the reluctant turning away of a personality from a world so lively, so energetic, so exciting that to turn away is in

itself a phenomenon. The moth is no longer scorched to cinders. He has flown out of the window back into the night, and the question is—whither?

All of this can be found made over into imaginative fiction reflectively cast in "The Snows of Helicon" by H. M. Tomlinson, a new book which apparently has been neither rightly appreciated nor understood. Tomlinson is a journalist—of genius, yet a journalist who has had a curious faculty for saying the new things not brashly in advance of certainty but when they could at last be adequately said. His hero is in love with building as we all have been. He is well-to-do, happily married, engaged in important projects. And suddenly, while he waits for a train, the pressure of doing the wrong thing successfully for the wrong motives is too much for him. His vast bourgeois hotel, just completed, rises like a ghoul from the desert of his past, and he slips off quite happily into a mild madness in which he defends beauty in danger and searches his own soul, en route on a track that leads so far as he can tell nowhere. "The Snows of Helicon" is a typical 1932-1933 book. There is still the protest in it, the ashes in the mouth, the disillusion of success in the most luxurious of known worlds, which have been so familiar to post-war readers that one takes them for granted as sure to appear somewhere in a novel. Yet there is also something new—heredity overcomes environment, the human being dusts his clothes of all that, stops worrying about technocracy and billboards on the highways, and goes on his way toward a different kind of satisfaction. He is tired of being crushed, and though disillusioned, realizes that you don't die of disillusionizing. Like the men and women in the bucolic novels he goes back to nature—human nature—to see what can be found.

I have read in literary pages recently characterizations of the new books of this season based upon prophecies of what they would probably be like, by critics who had not read them. I have not read them all, or even many of them yet. I

stances. But I check it by the extraordinary success of such writers as Willa Cather who have made reconstructions of the past which are obviously intended as foils to a present which had no clear shadows and no strong rocks. I don't know what the unpublished books will be like, but I can guess where some of them will be heading.

The sum of the matter is that if one is to talk about trends and turns and tendencies the obvious must not be taken too literally. The pamphlets of a period (even when written by the editors of *The Nation* and *The New Republic*) always overstate their case. Such writers are far-sighted, too far-sighted. The near reality blurs to an image of what they wish or fear, the more distant possibilities sharpen into certainties, until, like the prophets of the Old Testament, they see Jerusalem tumbling with the clarity of a moving picture. Nor is creative literature with a message or a moral much more reliable in its indications of social change. Negatively, tendency books, especially satires, are

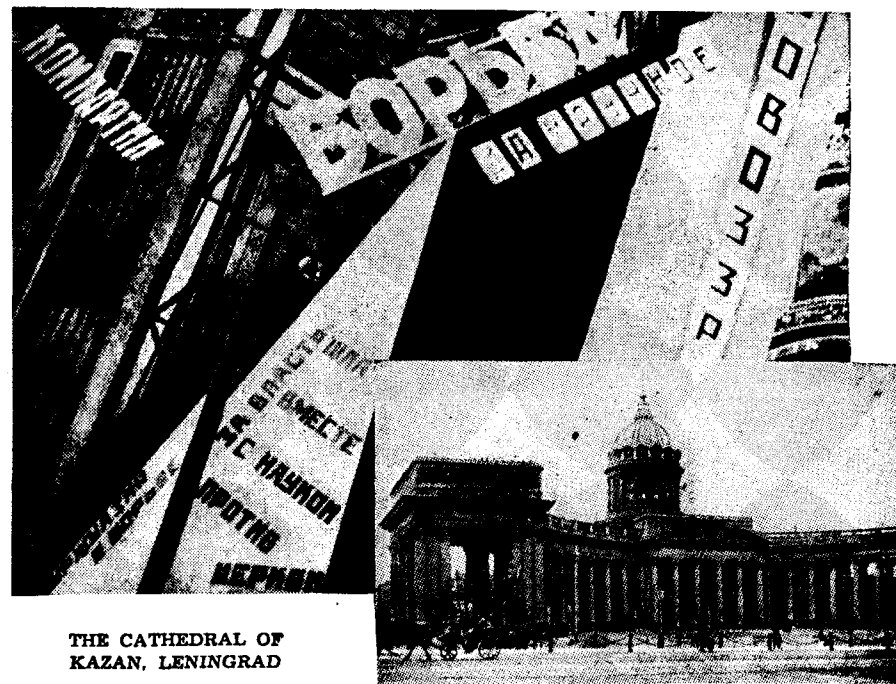
good indices. "Of Thee I Sing" and the novels of Sinclair Lewis and William Faulkner, or the recent novels about the proletariat by the intellectuals, have a satiric bite upon things hateful and not of good report, that tells the truth of what we don't want to have, don't want to be. I am surprised that no enterprising publisher has made an anthology of writing of this kind, calling it "How I Hate America." Historians would rejoice in such a collection, since the satirist and the realist wear telescopic lenses from which little evil is hid. Nevertheless, if you want the unmagnified truth as to social change, it is in the novels and plays and poems without a moral string to pull that you will find it. There, in unphilosophic interpretation of human nature, what actually is happening to us will be most accurately revealed. And that is why I am insisting on the sig-

An Exile Returns to Russia

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tiles; moments "when that corner of the great cathedral always seemed to me filled with endless waves of prayer, which, together with the clouds of incense and the perfume of the lilies, would steadily advance toward the silver shrine, mounting higher and higher until they reached the Virgin." These "flash-backs" occur frequently—when she sees again her old home on the Fontanka, at the opera, when she hunts up her old nurse, and visits her father's grave—and they make the old Russia live again behind the new with a warmth and naturalness difficult to achieve in any other way.

Mr. Blakeslee serves as what might be called the Dr. Watson of the narrative. It is he who asks the ingenuous lead-



Interior view showing anti-religious propaganda (photograph by Martha Havemeyer, from *The New York Herald Tribune*). Inset, the cathedral before the revolution.

nificance of the quiet regional books in which what

ceived as to the state of the public mind. There has been no such discontent with an industrial society as that which most of our intellectualist books for a decade now have presented—not even among the sufferers from an economic system awry. Only now, and still vaguely, is the idea spreading among the unreflective (which means ninety-nine and one-half percent of the world's population) that something is wrong with the scheme of things. Still more slowly, still more vaguely, is self-criticism accompanying it. But both ideas are awake and alive. Stendhal's post-Napoleonic heroes were motivated by despair because greatness seemed to have drained out of society. Shelley's characters tormented themselves with vast revolutionary hopes. Joseph Addison had a vision of order and good sense civilizing society and invented Sir Roger de Coverley to laugh away the least objectionable opposites. Here there was something new in books because life in every instance had begun to be different and was interpreted, not prophesied. Are there not already books in addition to the bucolic narratives I have chosen to write about which show that beneath behavior (the chief theme of plays and novels in the twenties) motivation is changing? And poems? I would cite MacLeish's "Conquistador" as one which upon analysis would prove to belong. But in general, since I am writing in advance of the crest of the flood of new books, I leave my observations pointed by a query which each reader, as the months unroll, can answer for himself.

Writing in *The Contemporary Review* of the late Anthony Hope, Charles Mallet says: "His powers of talk and of enjoyment made him very popular—a certain crisp authority of speech, great readiness in repartee and argument, a laugh which lightened any company that he was in. . . . He never lost his judgment or his sense of values. He remained to the last probably the least satisfied critic he had."

ing questions—"Marvellous—stupendous."

formed that the explanation lies in the fact that "it is everybody's army, each man feels responsible, not only for himself for the whole. Can't you see it in faces?" adds his own conviction that fifteen years they have been on the firing line. They will fight fifteen years, more years if necessary. Their enthusiasm will not be quenched. They are shabby, they are poor, but they are healthy and they can work, and Bolshevism goes marching on."

Occasionally, Mr. Blakeslee contributes a few pages of his own, signed with his initials, written in the historical present, and glowing with Yankee enthusiasm:

"It's a new world, a world reborn," I whisper to Irina, "it's alive, strong, ambitious, brave, eager to learn and to do everything as a child. No wonder they make mistakes."

"Now they sleep from exhaustion," she answers (the scene was a crowded railway station) "a hundred years ago—even twenty—they slept from inactivity or lack of will to do anything else."

When Mrs. Blakeslee returned from Russia last year and said, or was made to say by the ship news reporters, that the U.S.S.R. was all smiles and hopefulness and that most of the people seemed well fed, some rather bitter comments were made by other Russian emigrés, many of whom were sending Torgsin remittances to their relatives and friends still in Russia to keep the latter from starvation. To go into this aspect of her book would be to enter unnecessarily into what might be called a family quarrel in which the casual American reader has no proper part. Mrs. Blakeslee might well have made more of the terrible price which has been and still is being paid for the real accomplishments of the Revolution, and that a Russian of her background could avoid doing so offers, perhaps, a curious problem in personal psychology, but the fact remains that just such impressions as these have been made on disinterested foreigners, and that she adds to her reporting, as we have already remarked, sidelights which only such a visitor could contribute.

The Valiant Hope

By JOSEPHINE PINCKNEY

THE open pods of harvest yield up the seed:
And now the hour gaps for the fatal committal
Of a shrivelled body, this jot, this waxen and little,
Where choked in a death of earth it rocks until need.

Rocks not unfeeling, lurks not unknowing,
Blind but telling, deaf but counting the high
Wide swing overhead of planets clockwise in sky,
Biding its time in hiding with pulses slowing.

Till the microscopic fires kindle and rive
The tiny husk and there is a mighty scatter;
On this light pediment what a weighty matter
Is piled, what a tower mounts from a frail ogive!

The brooding Hebrew, the Greek of earth-pungent breath,
Paul the Convert, the sackcloth nations have grounded
Upon it celestial cities,—their hope unbounded
Of cleaving the black, egregious smother of death.