

The Prose Writing of Americans

MODERN AMERICAN PROSE. Edited by Carl Van Doren. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1934. \$2.75.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THIS particular anthology needed doing. In a sense it is complementary to Louis Untermeyer's "Modern American Poetry." Mr. Van Doren, with his catholic taste and keen perspicacity, was the ideal man to do the editing. He covers much ground, from Gertrude Stein to Ring Lardner—upon, may I venture to say, what seems to me an ascending scale. Such philosophers and essayists as George Santayana and the late Frank Moore Col-



Photo by Pirie McDonald
STUART P. SHERMAN

by are represented. Here appears the contemporary critic, Edmund Wilson, and the older literary critic, the late Stuart P. Sherman. Van Wyck Brooks is not forgotten, or even Paul Elmer More. George Jean Nathan and Henry L. Mencken ("Nathan, Mencken, and God") stand each with their harness on their back, the former explaining why he bothers at all with the theatre, the latter very pleasantly reminiscing about the late James Huneker. The late John Reed gives us a vivid flash of Moscow as it was in 1919, E. E. Cummings of La Ferté Macé in 1922. And that extraordinary individual, Randolph Bourne, is plucked from the past, for his "History of a Literary Radical." Bourne is now almost like a god in a mythology. He was one of those the gods love. Floyd Dell recalls to us the strange, somewhat airless atmosphere of the old Greenwich Village—he is the fond Bohemian of our time, though now remote from Murger—James Branch Cabell (before his not-so-subtle metamorphosis into Branch Cabell) appears before us as he was when we first exulted in "Beyond Life" and couldn't believe our eyes when we were reading "Jurgen." How golden and mellow those good old days seem now! The selection from Willa Cather is from "The Song of the Lark," and here are the squire of West Chester, Joseph Hergesheimer, and the Playboy from the Western World, Carl Van Vechten, both bowing from their brilliant pasts under the ægis of Alfred. I don't see why that particular selection from "San Cristobal"—when one considers all Hergesheimer has written—but if one didn't differ with an anthologist what good would he be? His choices must have some of the spice of the unexpected.

Of historical and biographical, rather than of other interest, is Theodore Dreiser's "My Brother Paul." Albert Jay Nock, that exceeding able editor, is represented by his opinion on "Artemus Ward." William Beebe stands tall in the actual jungle, desecrating on the psychology of sloths, and Joseph Wood Krutch, from the

jungle of stone and steel, turns to the psychology of one quite the opposite of a sloth, a poet who sang more wildly well than any in our time, one Edgar Allan Poe. Of the established older novelists besides those already mentioned, Mr. Van Doren chooses from Edith Wharton "Autres Temps" from "Xingu"; from Sinclair Lewis the Caribbean sojourn of Arrowsmith; and from Sherwood Anderson the short story, "I Want to Know Why." (Allow me specially to applaud this last!)

The leader of the novelists of a new era, F. Scott Fitzgerald, leaps upon the stage like a harlequin with one of the most fantastic of his short stories, "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." Thomas Beer, who has established a new style in biography, apart from his distinctive work in fiction, is allotted an extract from his "Stephen Crane." Elinor Wylie, greatest as a poet, scintillates in a section of her inimitable novel, "Jennifer Lorn." And, sharply contrasted with her perfect eighteenth century manner in prose, come that most American of hard-boiled American plays, "What Price Glory," by Anderson and Stallings, Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers," William Faulkner's "That Evening Sun" (again a favorite of mine), Thomas Wolfe's "A Portrait of Bascom Hawke," and Erskine Caldwell's "Death of a Hero" (from as unreal a book as I ever read, "God's Little Acre"). Add to these: extracts from the highly kinetic and vividly colored work of John Dos Passos and from the more *précieuse* Thornton Wilder and Glenway Wescott; from the intense Evelyn Scott, the wittily mordant Dorothy Parker, and that powerfully poetic novelist, Elizabeth Madox Roberts; and you have a pretty good cross-section of the best creative writing in prose that is being done today.

What remains to be said is what I conclude from this array as to the state of American letters. Here are some of the old stand of trees, and here is the new growth. I should say that the saplings seem to me both full of sap and sturdy. And the truly urbane seems to me, from this presentation, rather a thing of the past. That is, in a way, a pity; yet the various brilliance of American writers within the last quarter century or so cannot, I think, be disputed. In American literature the unexpected seems usually to happen. Outside such a selection of this is the great welter of books that has flooded, receded, and flooded again through all these years. And among the flotsam and jetsam thrown to the surface was a deal of good writing. We are a wasteful nation. We are prodigal of talent. And writing is no longer a profession apart with us, but an integral part of our daily life; which last is a condition (in spite of all the trash and balderdash many typewriters click out) of which I, for one, highly approve.

Charity Begins Abroad

BOY AND GIRL TRAMPS OF AMERICA.
By Thomas Minehan. New York: Farrar and Rinehart. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WALLACE M. GOLDSMITH

REFERRING in his "Conclusions" to our national messianic complex, Mr. Minehan says:

In days past we prided ourselves upon what we were doing not only for our own youth, but for the youth of all nations. Yet in the crisis we are sublimely doing nothing. . . . While other nations are building up their youth, we are permitting economic conditions to tear ours down. . . . The United States . . . are standing aside while the wolves of chance take the children.

The "children" are the two hundred

thousand vagrants between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, of whom one out of every twenty is a girl. The author associated with them off and on for two years, talking their lingo, eating their bread, sharing cold, fatigue, hunger, jail, and every hardship in the lot of a "bo."

Mr. Minehan finds the missions and local relief agencies incompetent to help child tramps. The Civilian Conservation Corps does not reach them for they have neither home nor dependants. Nor are they themselves dependants. That explains why most of them left home: the "big trouble" was upon them and they had to scam; they cannot therefore fall back upon their bankrupt families. Recruits through their ranks, an ever-increasing army. Neither work nor transient camps now in existence are able to cope with their numbers. Nor are the schools—curtailed as they have been—in a position to take over the burden shifted from family to state.

This economic travesty called society under whose sway we live, is making chronic cases of the youngsters, deforming them into street beggars or jailbirds, shunting them out onto the road again, from town to town, making travel easy but settling down in any one place difficult. It is to our national tradition—expanded to an economic theory of the mobility of labor—that Minehan attributes this vagabond complex in a large number of laborers—seasonal and otherwise—whose every home-making instinct has been uprooted.

Mr. Minehan has a method to propose of minimizing the evil effects of vagrancy. Wary after the brutal practices of the past and with an eye to successful efforts of a humane and constructive nature which like emergencies have called forth in Russia, Germany, and almost all of Europe, he would support summer camps with libraries, lecture-halls, and theatres, where games and sports of every description, calisthenics, crafts, and debating may be taught. However, realizing that such a place trains for camp life and not the complex social life of an adult, he offers a project for colonization—another twentieth century homesteading plan similar to Reedville, where self-respect and optimism become the natural heritage of these homeless thousands.

Why did not Minehan stick to his thesis? He shows to better advantage as a social historian than as a novelist. A convert to the cult of popularization, he gives one more reason. "Analysis was unsatisfactory. . . . To describe their life in statistical terms was . . . untrue." A qualified observer and reporter, he yet fails to give us life as, for instance, Harry Kemp does in "Tramping on Life."

When he turns historian for the group and traces vagabondage back to classical times, thence through the Crusades and down to the present, Minehan becomes convincing. He might have used the episode of Flagler's manager, Parrot, who brought four thousand transients from northern cities to Florida for building the Florida East Coast spur, the "Overseas Railroad" to Key West. Parrot's experience on that occasion was not reassuring: the crew all proved to be shiftless and a new force of skilled laborers had to be hired.

Not a few boys on the road since the depression have acquired the veteran tramp's mistrust of work. It is this anti-social trend of a bum's psychology, this enervating influence of the road, that challenges all citizens worthy of the name. How often we hear that desperate cry of the unfortunate boys in their teens: "I don't want to be a bum!"

Such Is Farming

THE BARTER LADY. A Woman Farmer Sees It Through. By Evelyn Harris. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by KATHARINE BALL RIPLEY

SOME nine years ago Evelyn Harris's husband died, leaving her with a Chesapeake Bay farm to manage and five children to bring up. "The Barter Lady" is the story of those years. They were years of struggle, of careful planning, of unremitting work for a worthwhile end. And one feels that in spite of tribulations (of which Mrs. Harris has certainly had her share) they were happy



EVELYN HARRIS

years. Between the lines the author stands out, a person of sense and humor and courage.

"Write what you do," an editor once told Mrs. Harris, "not what you think." As advice this would seem to have been sound. One cannot help regretting that the author, who writes so interestingly of the day to day life of her own farm and the details of its management, did not give us more of this and less of her analysis of general economic problems. Her conclusions in this regard somehow lack convincingness and the occasional long interpolations on the plight of American agriculture tend to break the flow of an otherwise simple and telling narrative. It is when Mrs. Harris rolls up her sleeves and ties on her apron and goes about overseeing the actual work of her house and farm that her story has force and character. One line of her homely and commonsense philosophy on this subject is worth a page of economic theorizing.

Educated to be a musician, married to a farmer, she found herself left as the manager of a proposition certainly as difficult and requiring as much expenditure of capital and hiring of labor as many manufacturing plants. Among other things, there were thirty thousand pear trees (some three hundred acres of pears) to finance and bring into bearing. The average reader, who has had no experience in fruit growing, will be startled to discover what it takes to put a dish of Bartlett's on the breakfast table—and how small a proportion of the price filters down to the grower. Perhaps the most interesting parts of Mrs. Harris's book are those dealing with her experiences in marketing her fruit. No one knows as well as the farmer the chicanery of the commission men and the utter stupidity of our system of distribution of perishable crops. And no one is less able to do anything about it.

Troubles there are in plenty. "It came a hail." "It came a freeze." "It came a flood." "It came a drought." That is farming.

However—"I decided in September 1926 that the farm was the place for me," says Mrs. Harris. "And I haven't given it up yet." And that is farming, too.

Mrs. Ripley has described her experiences as farmer in "Sand in My Shoes."



SOME OF THE AUTHORS WHO ARE WRITING AMERICAN PROSE TODAY

From left to right—Ernest Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, Joseph Hergesheimer, Willa Cather, and Sherwood Anderson

The Saturday Review of LITERATURE

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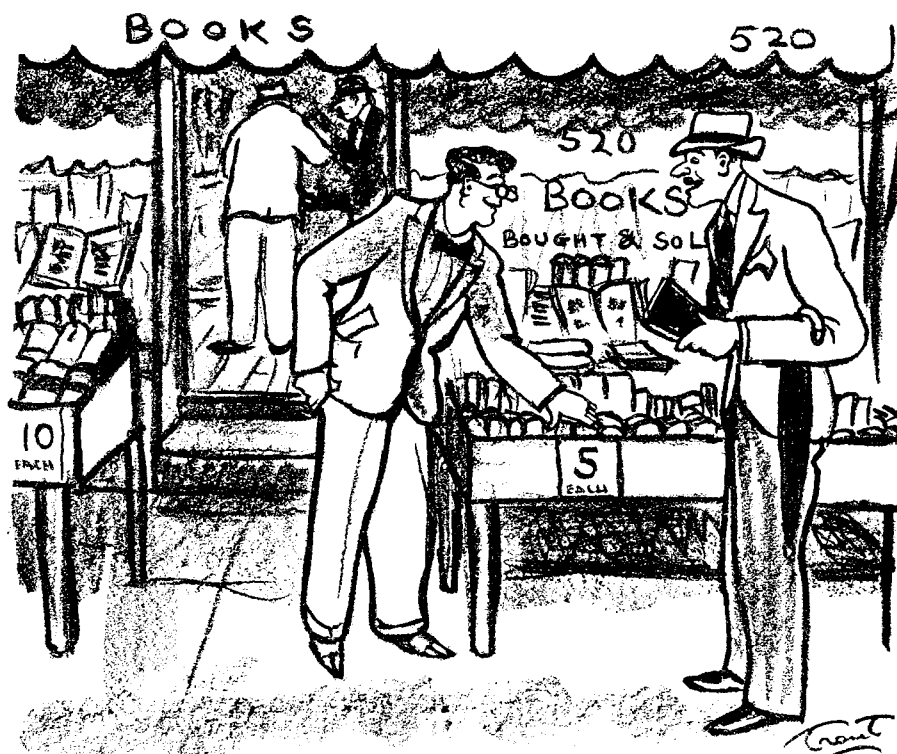
Present and Past

It is an anomaly more startling than curious perhaps, that as man's ability to observe the events of his day increases, his vision is myopically contracted. It is undoubtedly the very multiplicity and complexity of the happenings which modern methods of transmission of news bring within his ken that make it so difficult for him to turn his gaze from matters of the moment to the wider field of history. When governments crash and rulers climb to power or, in the German propagandist's term, "pass into eternity," as he watches, it is surpassing hard to remember that a long past and in all probability a longer future stretch away from the present. The moment engulfs us, civilization seems to totter, and chaos to threaten with the crisis of the instant. Yet the world has weathered many crises. If our self-appointed critics of contemporary affairs who, heaven knows, have enough to render them pessimistic in the march of current events, were to take time off to steep themselves a little in history, they might perhaps be less quick than now to pronounce finis to civilization, and more ready to grant that no era but has thrust some of its roots into the new soil of the future as it has nourished them on the old mold of the past.

But the trouble with so many of our critics is that they know no history. They are pragmatists who estimate happenings solely in their bearing on the interests of the moment, and who measure the happiness and success of nations in terms of the creeds of the day. They have neither the inclination nor the leisure to turn from the exciting incidents of the hour to the no less portentous events of bygone times, and consequently ever and again they improvise solutions to the problems that confront them, the unsoundness of which they would have to go no further than the schoolbooks to discover. It is a pity, for nothing more confuses judgment than vociferous opinion sprung from unfortified theorizing. Government could have no worse enemy. For when to the threat to the self-interest of its people which radical change implies is added addled discussion of complications, then indeed does national morale stand in danger of demoralization.

And the relation of all this to literature? None, except inasmuch as literature, in Carlyle's phrase, is the Thought of thinking Souls, and as its influence can be thrown to the cause of enlightening public opinion. There are all too many discus-

sions of public affairs being constantly rushed into print that are merely the vapors of excited individuals who see calamity written large on the face of the coming years, and who darken counsels by their despondency or their rashly offered panaceas. They may be right in their prophecies of gloom—he would be foolhardy indeed who would venture to deny them the possibility of ill. But they are hardly likely to render their forecasts less probable of materialization by half-baked cure-alls and ignorance of the past. The times cry aloud for knowledge, and knowledge, and more knowledge—for all the sober judgment, and all the carefully reasoned advice, and all the clear thinking that are to be found. Even today Englishmen come across the ocean and tell us that if we had followed more closely the train of political and economic developments in Great Britain we should not now be seeking salvation in certain measures there already proved useless. However that may be, certainly there can be only benefit to be derived from a study of the teachings of history, only danger in the glib assurance that offers theorizing in ignorance of them.



"DR. ROSENBAACH GAVE ME A DIME FOR A FIVE CENT BOOK ONCE!"

Letters to the Editor: *A Member of the Younger Generation Speaks Out*

Disillusioned Youth

SIR:—I am a college freshman. I was, until a few days ago, as happy and contented as is possible for a member of a generation that cannot call itself "lost" since it was never "found" in the first place. I had discovered that my greatest pleasures lay in reading the books I liked and, perhaps, in cherishing a few secret ambitions of writing some day myself. But all that is changed now, and since I have Christopher Morley to blame for my lost happiness, I feel that its ghost should be haunting you also. Therefore, I am writing this letter in a spirit of more or less gentle reproach.

It all came about in this manner: since I first started reading Mr. Morley's books, I had always had dangled enticingly before me the writings of Logan Pearsall Smith. Time and again I had promised myself to beg, steal, or borrow a copy of "Trivia," and see to just what extent his praise of it and its companion volumes was justified. But, as often as I vowed to obtain this book at long last, just as often, fortunately for myself, was my vow neglected.

Last week, however, guided, I doubt not, by some malign and evil power, I came across a copy of "All Trivia," which copy I immediately seized and took home. Having disposed of the book I was reading at the time, and wanting to read just a few pages to compose my mind for sleep, I started the book that very evening.

Now, everything might have been all right, had I only picked up a copy of "Trivia," or "More Trivia," or any one of the individual volumes. But no, I had to pick up "All Trivia," and having picked it up, I had to read it. And having read it—well—

For with "All Trivia" behind me, what possible enjoyment can there be in reading anything else? And what could possibly be the use in cherishing ambitions now exposed as completely futile? Has not Smith said everything that can be said, for once and for all? And has he not said it with a clarity and a succinctness that are impossible to emulate? I believe so, and it is this belief that has led me to write you.

Since I started this letter, I have seen the huge, black banner-head on the local Hearst evening paper. It says: "Europe Near New War." I suppose that I should go to bed this evening, apprehensive and fearful, to spend the night, without sleep,

thinking about the possibility of war, and my part in it. This I *should* do, but, instead, any inability of mine to sleep will be caused only by this terrific Washington heat.

Together with a large part of my generation, I have finally reached the point where I do not care whether we have a war or not. The mistakes of the past, particularly the World War, are not unknown to us, and once we passionately desired to avoid war at any cost. But now we do not, we cannot, care. We have seen men who should know through bitter experience that war does no one good and every one harm, go rapidly and calmly on with their armament plans. We have seen the militarists gain the upper hand in country after country. We have seen the League of Nations fail utterly in the crisis; and we no longer hope.

You may say, perhaps, that I am unduly pessimistic; that, together with my fellows, I am quitting long before the fight begins. I almost agree with you in this. Certainly, the very fact that Hearst says that war is imminent encourages me to believe that it is still far off. But is it far enough off? And, after all, is not war something definite in a world that has not even vague promises to offer us?

We are trying desperately to adjust ourselves to present day conditions, but we are completely bereft of all standards, all values. That is why, as a last resort, we are building up for ourselves a philosophy of despair, although we are fully aware of the terrible danger to ourselves and to the world that lies in our doing so; that is why *The Saturday Review* is fully justified in its editorial denunciation of the failure of youth in the crisis; and that is why I will sleep tonight a sleep untroubled by spectres of war.

—PYKE JOHNSON, JR.

Chevy Chase, D. C.

Prophecy Is Dangerous

SIR:—George Jean Nathan in his books on the theatre is so cross and so grouchy and so caustic in his dealings with the average production of today that he is satisfying reading for some of us who feel that way and like somebody else to say so.

Moreover, on rereading his works, one sometimes has the luck of discovering a humorous slant that perhaps was not intentional on the part of the vitriolic author.

In his "Art of the Night," 1928, pages 134 through 139 are devoted to his railings against the vitaphone. Some of us, having an innate antipathy to talkies, eat these railings right up.

But just listen:—on page 134 he says, "For if the vitaphone or its like is ever adopted generally by the movies it will not be long before the galleries of the legitimate theatres are again filled with the class who deserted them some years ago for the films."

From there on, for several pages, he explains that no movie audience is equal to the strain on its intelligence required by listening to words.

On page 138, "The moving picture fortunes have been built upon the sagacious business theory of showing the boobs everything and telling them nothing." And "If the vitaphone were to stick to words of one syllable, the movies might use it to

some advantage. That is possible. But the moment it went in for words of two or, on gala occasions, three, Mr. Adolph Zukor would have to sell his twelve Rolls-Royces and 82-carat diamond suspender buckles, learn English, and go back to work."

What a tough world this is for Mr. Nathan. But I hope his new book is coming out soon.

MARCIA F. HEALD.

Yonkers, N. Y.

The Browning Forgery

SIR:—Like all other biographers of the Brownings since Lilian Whiting in 1911 gave us the definite statement of Robert Barrett Browning that his father first saw the "Sonnets from the Portuguese" at Bagni di Lucca in 1849, I had to make my choice between that statement and the Gosse story of the Sonnets having been sent in 1847 to Miss Mitford to be printed. I did not hesitate, largely because I like my psychology straight. Elizabeth Browning, a high-minded English gentlewoman of the Victorian tradition, actuated always by exceptional delicacy and reticence, would never, in one outstanding instance of a lifetime, have violated that delicacy by showing to any one the intimate outpourings of her struggle from the shadow of death back to life and love, before she gave them to her husband to whom they belonged. Nor would she have chosen Miss Mitford of whom she wrote: "I love Miss Mitford though she understands me no more than you in England understand Louis Napoleon," and, "Personally she and I are strangers." The commerce of these two Victorian writers was on the subject of books, people, events, never of soul intimacy.

After the publication of my book I received some very pleasant letters from Mr. Thomas J. Wise. Speaking of the Reading Edition he made a statement of special interest just now since the Carter and Pollard book calls attention to the fact that no presentation copies exist: "The story has been told so many times by Forman, Gosse, myself, and others. Browning gave his own copy of the Reading booklet to Mrs. Orr. I possess Miss Mitford's copy."

We have all wondered what Browning thought of this discovery in 1886 of a hitherto unknown "first edition" of the Sonnets. I am afraid we shall never know!

HARRIET GAYLORD.

Yonkers, New York.

The Late Edward Atkinson

SIR:—Mr. Harold Williamson, recently a graduate student at Harvard and now an instructor in economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, took as the subject for his Ph.D. thesis the life of my father, the late Edward Atkinson who died in 1905. Besides being an eminent economist my father was a man of many and broad interests. Mr. Williamson's thesis upon him was so excellent a piece of work that I have decided to publish it with an additional chapter of my own upon my father's personal characteristics. I should be glad to get any of his letters or recollections of him which any of your readers may have, and shall of course return in good condition any correspondence that may be sent me.

EDWARD ATKINSON.

152 Congress Street, Boston, Mass.

The Saturday Review recommends

This Group of Current Books:

THE BALLIOLS. By ALEC WAUGH. Farrar & Rinehart.
One more saga of English family life.

ENGLISH JOURNEY. By J. B. PRIESTLEY. Harpers. A
chronicle of a trip through England from end to end.

THE HUNDRED DAYS. By PHILIP GUEDALLA. Putnam.
An account of Napoleon's escape from Elba and return to France.

This Less Recent Book:

THE TESTAMENT OF YOUTH. By VERA BRITAIN. Macmillan. An argument against war, if there ever was one.