

## Thief—Modern Style

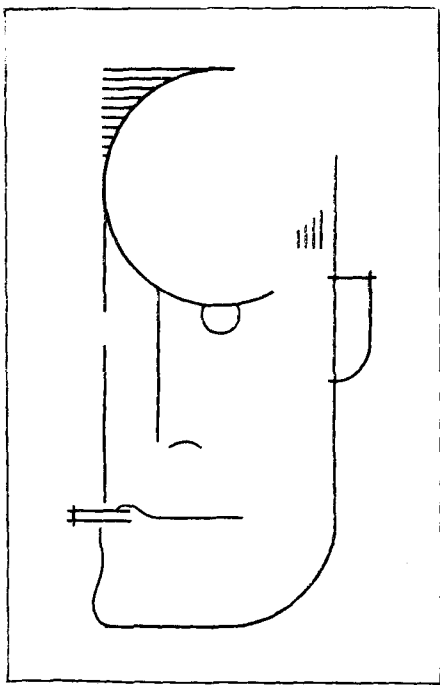
BRAIN GUY. By Benjamin Appel. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THIS is the sad story of a common or garden thief who lives by preying on modern society, is out for "the big dough," and gets into the sort of life he can't stop living. He is a rent-collector at first, "shakes down" the various speakeasies and houses of ill-repute from which he collects the rent; unwillingly—and yet fascinatedly—witnesses a murder; and, though indirectly, loses his job because of it. Being quite a rotten egg from the beginning, with an enormously swollen ego, even the fact that his younger brother, coming from the country to live with him, thinks he has a real job and is a real man, does not stop Bill's downward course under the impetus given him by a very hard guy indeed, one McMann. He plans the hold-ups of various stores he has formerly collected rent from, and finally even has the job done to a delicatessen in which his own brother works. He ends as a thoroughly debauched fool and a drunken murderer. Meanwhile his brother falls in love with the daughter of the German landlady, succeeds in getting her "into trouble," and, at the end of the book, is about to be drawn into Bill's malodorous activities.

This is another novel of the "hard-boiled" school, written in tough journalistic, that yet, somehow, peels off at times, revealing a certain artistic detachment. It is electrifying, and all that sort of thing, and imparts certain facts concerning pimps and whores which sound convincing chiefly because they induce mild nausea. The gangster stuff is not particularly fresh, because there have already been too many talking-pictures of gangsters. But Bill's analysis of himself, coupled with his inability to do anything about it, is well-imagined; and Mr. Appel knows certain locales in New York pretty thoroughly. He conveys the very effluvia of the dirty, degenerate life that seethes in the far-west forties, alongside decent tradesmen and honest citizens. He suddenly reminds one of all the apelike and wolflike faces one has seen casually, in passing, drifting along what *Variety* calls "The Main Stem." To his credit be it that he does not sentimentalize Madge, the whore, but presents her as she undoubtedly was. Wherefore, when she falls in love with Bill, one's pity is really moved—at least, temporarily. The younger brother, his love affair, his blind urge, and the response of the German girl, Cathy, are all faithfully set down. Having one's small share of the milk of human kindness one feels very sorry for Cathy—when you think what is ahead of her. Joe has something of his brother in him, and is therefore a bit of a bad smell himself; though, on the whole, a likable enough moron.

I should say that, as photography, this was a good job. The novelist apparently doesn't know how to end his book. He chops it off short at the end. As art the volume lacks much; and yet Mr. Appel has the faculty of handling the raw lingo of the streets, not merely in dialogue, but in analysis and description, so as to carry you rapidly along on the tide of his story. We have quite a few of these readable rough-and-ready writers now in the United States. They are most significant of the type a great cosmopolis breeds. The constant stimulation of all the senses in a city like New York, the constant hectic excitement just around the corner, makes the unnatural natural. Those that prey upon the city—and their name is Legion, both in the seats of the mighty and in the sewers—are partly the product of a mass-energy that sweeps them off their feet. As for the novelist: Mr. Appel can write shrewdly of a certain cross-section of city life that he has had under close observation. He sees not merely maggots in the cheese, but fair-to-average boys that come from Easton, Pa., and rather dumb girls that hail from Brooklyn. These turn into "brain guys" and whores; partly from bad breaks, partly because circumstances so arrange themselves as to bring out essential weaknesses. There is not a little pathos in this book. The author is not a hard guy; but, a sensitive person with an



From the jacket of "Brain Guy"

integrity of purpose determined to set down both language and episode precisely as they occur in that segment of real life he has chosen for his material. Over and above that, he can bring human sympathy to bear upon his characters.

In fact Mr. Appel has a flair for character—to call it that. Moreover, I should think that if any book could deter from vice, this would be the one.

## Concha Espina's Latest Novel

THE WOMAN AND THE SEA. By Concha Espina. New York: Rae D. Henkle. 1934. \$2.50.

THE original Spanish title of Concha Espina's novel, *Agua de Nieve*—"Snow Water," or "Melting Snow"—better suggests its drift than the rather vague label attached to the English version. For it is the story of the eventual melting—humanizing—of its heroine's heart after a lifetime of selfishness.

Regina de Alcántara is slightly reminiscent of Hedda Gabler. Incapable of love or even of true friendship, she shines, nevertheless, with a sort of cold fire; is sensitive, nervously alive, driven by a fierce desire to experience all sorts of human emotions without being ready to pay the ordinary human penalty. She hopes to have all the thrills—to snatch at happiness—and avoid all the pains. For the better part of the story, she is a pretty pestiferous sort of person, making trouble for nearly everyone she touches.

In so far as she is intended to represent the modern "emancipated" woman, and the latter's difficulties, she is doubtless a more novel and significant type in Spain than out of it. There is nothing particularly startling, at least in the notion of a Regina de Alcántara, in most parts of the Western world. But you can't simply dismiss her with such words as "cold" and "shallow"—that self-sufficiency and passionate drive toward more and more poignant experience is at least an opposite of weakness, and represents, if not dignity, at any rate a sort of strength.

The novel's sombre romanticism, the frequent preoccupation with death, as well as the unfamiliar social milieu in which the characters move, will give most American readers the sense of entering a foreign and in some ways curiously old-fashioned world. In her descriptions of the little old town of Torremar and its townspeople, Concha Espina writes with the realistic warmth to which our theatre-goers have become accustomed in the plays of the brothers Sierra, for instance—and with which we feel quite at home, Spanish as it may be—yet Regina de Alcántara herself frequently seems almost as remote from actuality, as much a fanciful type detached from the everyday world as some of the Byronic figures in the poems and plays of the early nineteenth century. Yet even those who may find difficulty in quite getting the hang of Concha Espina's story will be grateful for its whiffs of the real Spain and for the chance to read another work by one of Spain's most distinguished women.

## A Ballet With Program Notes

SO RED THE ROSE. By Stark Young. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GEORGE STEVENS

REPEATED handling of certain scenes and subjects in American life has contributed to the emergence of a few well-established patterns in American fiction. A definite pattern exists for the novel of the South during the Civil War; readers have become familiar with the typical plantation household, and with the drama of secession, war, and reconstruction in which each southern family played the same part. Such a pattern can be of considerable value to the novelist in providing him with a point of departure for his own vision, his own imagination. But the danger is obvious that familiar material may produce a stereotyped result.

Mr. Young's novel shows both the advantages and the drawbacks of the pattern. The author chooses to establish his background in great detail before the drama begins. His principal characters, the members of two Mississippi plantation families, became familiar to us in their adumbration of the system of living which existed in the South before the war, while they themselves remain long untouched by the developing crisis. The portrait of a society preoccupies the attention; but its distinctions are negative. The author avoids both the romantic picture and the debunking picture of the old South, but his picture is still conventional. It gives the impression of having been built up out of a mass of family documents and reminiscences, rather than directly imagined; and it is not peopled with interesting individuals. In both the families, the Bedfords and the McGehees, blood is so much thicker than water that it positively stands still in their veins. There are multitudes of sisters, cousins, and aunts who for a long time are almost indistinguishable.

During all this, the events of history are recorded separately, as if in footnotes, running parallel with the personal story and never meeting it. The effect is that of a ballet with program notes. The ballet as such is very well done, if the stage seems crowded; the dancers go expertly through their motions, the backdrop is pretty, the symbols conventional and clear. If one finds it dull, one is doing no more than expressing a personal opinion. One cannot legitimately ask for human beings in a ballet.

But later on, when the war comes to Mississippi, the story changes. Characters do emerge, and history, to some extent, with them. There are excellent sketches of Grant and Sherman; shrewd, if not original, explanations of Confederate mistakes; many sidelights on events and personages which are none the less acute for being partisan. For instance, Mr. Young points out that Grant came to Mississippi with his own slaves after the Emancipation Proclamation; that in 1865 "southern people were shocked to read in the newspapers the report of the famous Mr. Emerson's speech in which he suggested that it might be a kind Providence that had got Lincoln out of the way." Here also the Bedfords and McGehees intermittently come to life. But the treatment is somewhat mixed. In the descriptions of battles, in the burning of the McGehee plantation, in the scene where a mother with her faithful slave goes to Shiloh to recover the body of her son, there is more than a hint of "The Birth of a Nation." Mr. Young's writing, of course, gives his account a considerable if superficial distinction; there is no crudity, but there is certainly melodrama.

It is difficult for the reader to determine whether Mr. Young is trying to distil from his material the artistic or the historical truth. The two approaches are fused without unity. His picture of southern life is attractive, and his choice of the most admirable of the plantation owners as his characters is perfectly legitimate artistically. But, while the book is of nostalgic quality, it will, because of its process of selection, probably

excessively by those who suffer from an Oedipus complex about the old South. The fire-eaters are absent, and the only unattractive characters are the poor whites. For the purposes of history, or even of polemics, the canvas should be broader.

The book takes its title from the verse of Omar Khayyam: "I sometimes think that never blows so red the rose as where some buried Caesar bled." One feels that Mr. Young comes to praise Caesar; but, for all his efforts, Caesar remains buried.

## Grand Tour

SWEET LAND. By Lewis Gannett. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1934. \$2.

MR. GANNETT and his family spent last summer making the Grand Tour of the United States by Ford (V8, not Model T) with an enthusiasm adequately indicated by the title. Many writers have done that of late, but mostly to find out what people are thinking or talking about, or else to confirm convictions arrived at before they started as to the future of this republic. The Gannetts, apparently, went only for to admire and for to see; and this book, based on the travelogues Mr. Gannett sent back to the *Herald Tribune*, is at once an advertisement and an extremely useful Baedeker for others who want to do the same.

The automobile, says Mr. Gannett, has brought some of the old intimacies back into travel.

Again the wheels cease turning at meal time and over night. Again there is leg-stretching and casual conversation. You stop at night in a roadside cabin whose owner is a self-respecting individual, a person who wants to tell you his own troubles and find out what kind of an animal you are.

You can get this last, perhaps to excess, if you stay at home; but there is no question that if you want to see rather than to go somewhere, the car is the vehicle you ought to take. Mr. Gannett's reports or what he saw are just that, and not attempts at literature of travel; though he makes a creditable transit of that classic *pens asinorum*, a description of the Grand Canyon. But they make the reader want to go and see things too.

By way of sample, it may be noted that "the loveliest building we saw anywhere in the country was a superb grain elevator somewhere along the road to Oklahoma City"; that "the West may yet come to be known as the land where writing is recognized as an honorable profession"; that "Hollywood seems the most healthful section of Los Angeles—it at least does not try to fool itself"; and that the Southwest, really the oldest seat of American civilization since it contained flourishing cities long before Leif Ericson saw the Atlantic seaboard, is enough to make any man (or at least any fourteen-



Drawing by Ruth Chrisman Gannett, from "Sweet Land."

year-old boy) want to stay there and be an anthropologist. Opinions on the state of the nation are rare; private initiative is seen at its worst in southern California, where every man has bored an oil well in his back yard and consequently nobody gets enough oil to pay out. But against this rugged individualists may take comfort in the story of the bears of Yellowstone Park, who live high in summer on the tourists' garbage and thus lose the spirit to get out and rustle their own living when autumn comes and they are taken off the dole.

Mr. Gannett contributes illustrative material which also make the reader want to go.



# Brave, Translunary Things

POETRY, ITS APPRECIATION AND ENJOYMENT. By Louis Untermeyer and Carter Davidson. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1934. \$3.50.

Reviewed by ARTHUR COLTON

THIS is a rich book, first, because it consists mainly of poetry itself, and second, because the editors, sensitive and discriminating, are everywhere present telling us of brave, translunary things. They are not impeccable. On the first page of the opening essay one reads:

It is only in our own time and in our own country that poetry is suspected.—We must recognize such prejudice the more since it seems to be prevalent in these States. The prejudice is as paradoxical as it is inconsistent. It did not exist in Greece, where the poet was venerated as dramatist and spokesman priest; nor in Rome, where the Caesars vied with the singers; nor in the Middle Ages, wherein no court was complete without its local laureate, no castle worthy of the name that did not house a troubadour or minnesinger. Nor is it found in modern Europe. The prejudice against poetry is chiefly an Anglo-Saxon innovation.

All this is rather juvenile. Esthetics are as complex as humanity. Did not exist in Greece? There was one Plato of Athens in whose ideal republic poets were prohibited on carefully reasoned principles. Only two insane or moronic Caesars disgraced themselves in the eyes of all respectable Romans by vying with singers. The Romans were as unpoetical as any other people, and there were no Caesarian poets worth mentioning. What the Romans objected to was a Caesar twanging a harp on the stage, as one might to a President dancing a cancan there. Medieval castles liked minstrels as they liked tumblers and trick performers, because castle life was dull, but local laureates were always scarce in local courts, unless possibly at one time in southern France. In "these States" the works of poets are given prizes, and sold to and read by thousands, but what the poetry does to them nobody knows. It is probable that sung or intoned verse is not heard even in Europe by the masses as it once was. The relations of poetry to the great middle class of literate people are perhaps similar in all modern countries of Europe and America. The prejudice against it dwelt solidly in the minds of the unimaginative and matter of fact in the times of Sidney and Shelley as it does today. But if it was a purely English prejudice, it must have been a stimulating one, since the greatest poetry and more of it than elsewhere came out of England. Messrs. Untermeyer and Davidson's account is not good history, but their defense of poetry is sound, and on much the same ground as Sidney's and Shelley's. There will always be those who do and those who do not care for poetry, and small results of argument between them. They might as well let each other alone.

One of the interesting features of this volume is the way modern poetry is planted and unashamed side by side of the ancient altars and their consecrated bays. It is good to see Elinor Wylie near John Keats, Whitman not far from a psalm, and to note that the modern does not wilt in these august presences. A. E. Housman sings as authentically as Herrick. No classical parallel can make Robinson and Frost commonplace, or take from either the edge of his distinction. Emily Dickinson's "light foot ghost slips into Milton's heaven." (See this curious poem by Horstense Landauer, p. 140, which should be, but is not, in the Index, under Dickinson.)

The Angels and Archangels viewed  
Her small and spectral bones.

But plucking her dimity apron straight  
And setting her collar right,  
Emily took three confident steps  
Up to the Core of Light.

Her light feet are as confident as Emerson's, her "divine irreverence" as thrilling as Blake's; she is gay when Emily Brontë is stern, and neither is afraid.

In the Introduction to Book II of the present volume, on "The Rhythms of Po-

etry," the editors say all that need be said about the prejudice against poetry. Childhood finds its way into it through rhythm, as its ancestry did long ago. There is a strong current that is apt at maturity to set in the opposite direction. The love of poetry is the prolongation of youth. The substance within the vision, the rhythm within the chaos—when we have forgotten this substance and this vision, if we ever knew them, we soon become prejudiced. Book II is an interesting introduction to the technique of the subject. Many modern poets are experimental in the technique of rhythm and rhyme, and the old-fashioned ear, accustomed to simpler tunes, does not react favorably. Dissonance in place of consonance, that is, the rhyming of consonants but not vowels, does not slip smoothly and happily into me. I have to spell it out and am annoyed. The vowel is the dominant sound. But there is no reason why dissonance as well as assonance, or the rhyme of vowels alone, might not chime happily enough if one were used to it. Poets like Whitman, Jeffers, and McLeish have a sense of rhythm strong and true enough to make disciples for their deeper pulsations. Rhyme does more than help memory and make a pleasant tinkle. It marks and emphasizes rhythm. The Saxon alliteration, the Hebrew echo of the same meaning in altered metaphor, the pause and final spondee of the Greek hexameter, serve much the same purpose. Reasons in esthetics are natives of the subconscious, and it is odd that from so vague a world should emerge these hankerings after precision, these enchantments of regularity and repetition.

## Post-War Diplomacy

(Continued from first page)

office was moreover coincident with a long series of British disasters. Thus he writes—

Here was a man possessed of great intelligence, of flaming energy, of clear ideas, of unequalled knowledge, of wide experience. To this man was granted an opportunity such as seldom falls to any modern statesman; and yet, although in almost every event his judgment was correct and his vision enlightened, British policy under his guidance declined from the very summit of authority to a level of impotence such as, since the Restoration, it has rarely reached.

With the present incumbent Sir John Simon, as Nicolson might have added, that decline has not yet been arrested.

What was the reason for the slump? Was it Curzon's fault or did it result from the fact "that the chaos of the post-war period was beyond the capacity of any single human brain either to conceive or control?" On reflection, Nicolson inclines to the latter explanation. As far as England is concerned he believes something snapped at the close of the war. The British people demanded all the fruits of victory of their statesmen but they were unprepared to do anything more to make sure of them.

British statesmanship was, therefore, faced with the fatal dilemma, it had to produce results and it had no means at its hand. The problem was, too, complicated by the character of Lloyd George himself. He knew what he wanted—"as the creator of policy he was often superb, as the executant he was often deplorable." Curzon, by contrast, was not creative. At the end of the war, Lloyd George wanted to get back to the tradition of the balance of power, to shift over from France to Germany and Russia.

British public opinion was not, however, prepared to back him against France or support him in championship of the recent foe at the expense of the late ally. He had therefore to act by indirection, to seem to go in one direction when he was actually resolved to travel in another. But the result was that he destroyed the greatest of all the assets of British diplomacy in past centuries, which was reliability.

Reliability was, too, the great inheritance of Curzon, when he went to the Foreign Office to become "the last of that unbroken line of Foreign Secretaries, who

had been born with the privileges of a territorial aristocracy and nurtured in the tradition of a governing class." With later arrivals, MacDonald, Henderson, and Simon, that sequence was shattered forever. Of that hitherto unbroken line Nicolson writes, summing up the past of British Foreign Policy memorably—

For them the central purpose of British Foreign Policy was the maintenance of the empire and the security of the British Isles. They sought to achieve their purpose by undeviating adherence to three essential principles. The first was the command of the seas. The second, the balance of power in Europe. The third, the defense of imperial frontiers and communications.

There was also an important corollary, the thing had to be done with the least possible expenditure of men and money.

It was at this point that British policy broke down in the post-war period. In the pre-war era, British statesmanship had succeeded because it was able to make prestige take the place of men and money. That prestige rested upon reliability. "So long as our rule appeared inevitable it remained unquestioned," says Nicolson. At the close of the war, however, "large numbers of British citizens suddenly ceased to believe with absolute conviction in the Empire." The consequence was that Lloyd George and Curzon were both obliged to make bluff take the place of prestige and in that undertaking they failed dismally.



LORD CURZON CONDUCTS HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN THROUGH BALLIOL COLLEGE (MAY, 1921)

They failed first in the matter of Turkey, when the Greeks were encouraged to land in Smyrna only to meet defeat at the hands of Kemal Pasha. Curzon foresaw the consequences of the blunder but he could not prevent it because Lloyd George was at that moment trying to buy off Italy in the Adriatic by real estate in Anatolia. The result was Chanak, which finished Lloyd George. The second failure was in Poland. While London fumbled and faltered, France sent Weygand to turn defeat into victory and after the Battle of the Vistula which broke the thrusting power of Bolshevism, French prestige was up and British down.

It was the same about Persia. Curzon made a brilliant treaty but before it could be ratified Teheran had turned to Moscow. It was the same about Upper Silesia, but the ultimate and devastating exposure of British weakness was the French occupation of the Ruhr. In fact, and no one has ever made the point clearer, the basic mistake of British diplomacy in the Lloyd George-Curzon period was in dealing with France. The question of French security was the basic problem of the post-war period and they dodged it.

When the United States repudiated the Treaty of Guarantee, which Wilson and Lloyd George had bestowed upon Clemenceau in return for his renunciation of the French claim to permanent occupation of the left bank of the Rhine, and the British pledge went by the board as well, the British had to do one of two things, guarantee French security themselves or undertake to coerce the former ally. In no third way was it possible to establish order in Europe or insure economic recovery in Germany.

Coercion, however, was both materially and morally impossible; materially be-

cause with the demobilization of the British and American armies and the dissolution of the German, France recovered a military dominance of the Continent which had lapsed after Waterloo; morally, it was out of the question because the British public was not ready to resort to force in the interests of the former enemy. But the situation was now in French hands because the reparations payments demanded of Germany were impossible and the penalties fixed for failure to fulfil the impossible were specific.

As long as French security was not assured, France could prevent German recovery. She could do more, she could gather about herself a combination of smaller states, equally menaced by a strong Germany, whose armies would reinforce the French and whose diplomats would give France the ascendancy internationally, at Geneva and elsewhere. France had to be fought or bought. When Lloyd George and Curzon sought to evade both horns of the dilemma, they encountered French hostility everywhere and that hostility wrecked all British efforts, in Asia Minor, in Upper Silesia, in the German question generally.

Trying to salvage Germany without openly breaking with France, pretending that the Entente Cordiale existed, while seeking to restore the balance of power, Britain encouraged a German resistance which only led to German disaster. In

fact, it would have been better, so Nicolson quotes dispassionate German opinion as concluding, if the British had held their peace. As it was the Germans acted in the hope of British support only to find themselves compelled in the end to surrender to French force.

This part of Nicolson's book ought to be read with especial care by the American State Department and by all Americans interested in international affairs, as well. For American official and unofficial opinion shared in the British miscalculation. On the eve of the Ruhr, Mr. Hughes went to New Haven and addressed France in the tone in which King Canute had spoken to the ocean and with the same effect. Mr. Hoover uttered his moratorium without consulting Paris and the result was failure. Always there was the same idea of isolating France, but it is hard to isolate a nation which controls a million bayonets and is willing to use them.

It was the British will which cracked up with the armistice, that, after all, is the explanation of the collapse of British diplomacy in the post-war period, according to Nicolson, and there is no present indication that national resolution has been restored. After the Ruhr the British made Locarno to satisfy French desire for security, but it was, thinks Nicolson, two years too late. By that time French distrust had become deep-seated and German ruin too complete to be arrested. The result was Hitler and, after Hitler, one may discover in the latest moves of British diplomacy the same reluctant but inescapable drift back toward France.

Against post-war diplomacy Nicolson detects a contemporary reaction—"there is a tendency today to react against the unctuous inertia, the flood-lit self-righteousness, the timid imprecisions, the ap-