

The Mystical Value of Art

EXPRESSIONISM IN ART. By Sheldon Cheney. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation. 1934. \$5.

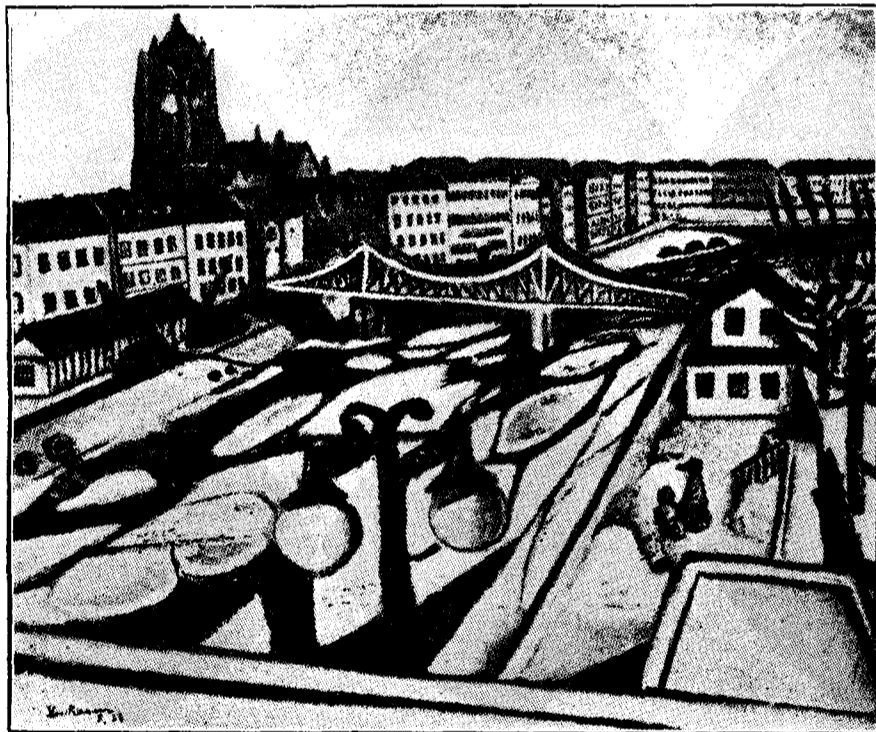
Reviewed by VIRGIL BARKER

AS Mr. Cheney himself notes, controversy over the art "movements" of the past quarter-century is being supplanted by discussion; in his own "Primer of Modern Art" he felt compelled to exhort and rebuke the unconverted, but he now feels more free to seek for some positive and unified achievement. Mr. Cheney has not written that balanced summation of a period which can be best composed after it is all over; his condemnation of the nearer past is still too indiscriminate in character, if less acrimonious in tone, and his enthusiasm permits him to overrate the work of his chosen expressionists. But he has written a helpful interpretation of twentieth-century experimentalism as not alone a rebellion against restrictions but in addition a return to vital sources of tradition. He defines his terms, avoids pontification, and does his best to escape the taint of system-making.

Very importantly his book differs from the other attempts of the past year or so to cover the same ground in its recognition of the mystical nature of art—for creator and appreciator alike. Where other books are intellectualist all through, this one is so only in the language by which it attempts to describe a non-intellectualist core of experience. Touching at the close upon other arts but dealing mainly with painting, its five central

rate simplification makes all the more deplorable what may prove to be a still more influential mistake: the choice of "realism" for the label inclusive of all that is antagonistic to expressionism. The former is too valuable a word to be wasted on unintelligent academicism and the mere imitation of appearances. Correctly elaborated, that word could be made to designate the fundamentally life-communicating quality of all great art. The thing for which it properly stands is an affair of depth and intensity of perception. Cézanne himself seems to have had this sort of thing in mind when he talked of "realizing"; and at least some of Mr. Cheney's mystic form-seekers could be truly praised as realists of spiritual exploration. But, of course, if a reviewer desires to rectify another's book to this sweeping extent, he should write his own book against the field; and this reviewer regretfully acknowledges Mr. Cheney's right to his own definitions.

Any book on expressionism designed for the layman requires particular care in illustration. The numerous examples here given, especially from the ancestors of the movement, do much to make the book serviceable to art in general. But they are too often blurred by being reproduced from other illustrations and too often printed overly black—both defects which work special injustice to the most typical expressionistic works. They are likely to confuse those who have not yet learned the imaginative translation of mere black-and-whites into the medium of colored pigment.



ICE FLOES. By Max Beckmann. (Courtesy of J. B. Neumann.)
Reproduced from "Expressionism in Art."

chapters deal with "picture-building." Here the emphasis is rightly upon the fluidity of the creative process, which can only be falsified by any set of rigid labels or a determinate succession of mental states, and upon the "energetics," or tension between form and form, of the resulting work. Unavoidably the language here becomes not easily understandable by the reader in a hurry; but, taken as tentatively as it is offered, it can profit the thoughtful layman.

Mr. Cheney wisely says that "... today perhaps no terminology is good outside the volume in which it is used." But any book as good as this is bound to start ripples and waves of critical verbalisms. One of these, if it becomes generally adopted, will prove a decided gain over current confusion: the substitution, for the many sectarian words ending in "ism" and for the inexact "modernism," of "expressionism." Mr. Cheney backs his choice by good authority, by a certain degree of established usage, and by sound argument. For him it covers all the recent radicalisms except futurism and surrealism; and to this reviewer the word appears adequate to them also as concerns their intent. This move in the direction of accu-

Exterminator of Humbugs

PASSING JUDGMENTS. By George Jean Nathan. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RANDOLPH BARTLETT

OF all the productions of the American theatre, the most diverting and not the least important is George Jean Nathan. Only the ocular proof of his existence refutes the suspicion that he was invented by the theatre managers to make their activities seem worthy of intelligent consideration.

Of all subjects upon which writing fellows bestow their attention, there is none over which such a vast flood of perpetual pish-posh is poured. The obvious reason is there is so little in the theatre of today to inspire real literary effort, that the astute and highly paid gentlemen of the press protect their jobs by engaging in personal exhibitionism, which is usually more diverting than the nominal subject itself.

Yet here at hand is the twentieth Nathan book in about as many years,



GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

nearly all devoted to essays bearing more or less directly on the stage. Everybody knows there is not that much to be said about the theatre, that is worth saying. There is hardly a subject in the world which cannot be exhausted in a fraction of this space. The explanation is that a good deal of the time, Nathan is not actually writing about the theatre at all. What starts out as a discussion of the shapeliness of the girls in the latest revue is just as likely as not to amble off into an analysis of the influence of the polyphonic art of the Spanish vihuelistas upon the compositions of Bach, or to an exposition of the incapacity of the French for self-government.

"Passing Judgments" is that kind of book. Nimble skipping from low and raffish humor to scholarly analysis, it is a literary vaudeville for persons of catholic taste. Nathan never tries to deceive either himself or his reader as to the intrinsic value of the theatre. His attitude toward it is that of the fond father of an idiot child, deformed and vicious, who refuses to send it to an institution because it once uttered a sound that was vaguely recognizable as "Daddy."

Let the theatre display the least symptom of intelligence, either in acting or writing, or even in management, and Nathan yanks out all the stops of his organ and blares a Marche Triomphale, fortissimo. The next moment he may be thwacking even his friend Eugene O'Neill, but his glee in discovering something he can praise is almost pathetic. He is anxious to like the theatre, but not to the point of sacrificing his intellectual integrity.

The one thing he seems to hate is humbug. The sure thrust with which he strikes to the heart of bombast and pretence is equalled only by the best matadors. One of the finest performances he has ever given in this respect is the six pages in "Passing Judgments" in which he deftly disposes of Gertrude Stein's theory of verbal sound and rhythm.

While the more spectacular flights of Nathan's criticism are his excoriations of bad management, bad writing, and bad acting in the theatre, he is not a pessimist concerning the institution. "The American Theatre of Today" is the title of a chapter in which he has nothing but praise and encouragement for the experimental producers. "The new American theatre," he says, "with all its ambitions and hopes, may true enough, for all its great step forward, be still far from the top of the celestial ladder, but it is climbing hard, and steadily, and unmistakably."

It is true that Nathan's ambitions for the theatre are much higher than the ambitions of the theatre for itself. Max Beerbohm, in one of his neatest essays, has explained why theatrical criticism inevitably arouses resentment. But it would be well for managers, actors, and playwrights to remember that Nathan has been studying their medium for twenty-five years, and to think of him as a friend instead of regarding him much as the Southern negro does the Ku Klux Klan. Still, most people are pretty human, and in view of the razor edge of Nathan's style, it is not surprising that the stage folk say:

You might have been right to disseminate your love,
But why did you kick me downstairs?

No Blurbs Needed

WEBSTER'S NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY, SECOND EDITION UNABRIDGED. Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam. 1934. \$20.

EVEN though the blurbs (a colloquialism adequately defined in this new dictionary) on the dust cover, such as "the most notable publishing event of the century," and "the greatest single volume ever published" give pause, a general survey of this highly important work produces a most favorable impression. Edited under the general supervision of President Neilson of Smith and an extensive and highly expert corps of assistants and advisers, the book seems adequate to every demand that is likely to be made upon it by all except the most-specialized scholars. It is particularly rich in new technical terms.

This second edition is a revision of the edition of 1909. As the general editor says in his introduction:

Such a revision is far from being a mere supplementing by addition. The constituting of the vocabulary of the present volume has been a highly selective process in which the problem of discarding was second only to that of adding. Space has had to be found for so much that is new that the pages have had to be disencumbered of much that has become comparatively useless or obsolete. Yet, since the older literature will still be read, mere obsolescence is no criterion. Many discontinued scientific terms may fairly be regarded as dead and may safely be omitted, but obsolete words in literature call for explanation as much as ever. In the decisions which have had to be made on such questions, no simple rule of thumb like the fixing of a date after which a word ceases to appear will suffice; much depends on who among older writers has used it. In general, words which had become obsolete before 1500 have been omitted, but the whole vocabulary of Chaucer has been retained. Occasional disappointment is inevitable, but when it came to a choice between a word used last by an obscure writer of the sixteenth century and an essential term in aviation, it seemed clear that the greater usefulness was to be obtained by explaining the latter. It is obvious that such judgments cannot be absolute; the editors have sought by consultation and accumulation of instances to reduce to a minimum the personal and capricious.

Thus scope and balance are both guaranteed and seem to be present.

Particularly valuable features in the numerous appendices are the synopsis of words differently pronounced by different orthoepists, and the pronouncing biographical dictionary which has been brought up to date with special reference to new American data. Webster's Unabridged is so familiar that it is not necessary in this brief note to go into further description, except to say that the work as a whole shows the results of a most complete and intelligent overhauling and expansion.

Marie Antoinette

THE MERRY QUEEN. A Historical Narrative of the Happy and Tragic Life of Marie Antoinette. By Pierre Nezelof. Liveright. 1934. \$2.50.

THIS book purports to be biography. In reality it is fiction of the most florid variety. The publisher's challenge for it a comparison with Zweig's treatment of the same material, but such a comparison would be quite fruitless. Here we have the story of Marie Antoinette told with an intimacy of detail that is wholly bewildering—the flighty and lazy Archduchess distressing her tutors and calling down upon herself the lengthy maternal advice of the severe Maria Theresa; the mad, reckless gayety of a Versailles that brooked no restraints, not even financial ones; amazing conversations of King with Queen on the most delicate of marital subjects; and finally, done with a technique that ought to arouse the jealousy of Hollywood and send tittering shopgirls into ecstasies, scenes of passionate love-making between the Queen and the Count Axel de Fersen. From the historian's point of view the book is worthless. Admirers of glib romances, however, should find it attractive for its facile inventions and its giddy interpretation of "the Austrian" as a quixotic madcap, surrendering to one vital love.

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It Is Up to the Colleges

And still we ask, why do not college graduates—male college graduates especially—buy or read more books? For the testimony so far collected and published in these pages answers everything but the direct question. Men who have never seen the inside of a college crowd the libraries. This or that individual—a born reader—emerges from college with his tastes enriched and his scope broadened. But, the fact remains, the American adult men who have been graduated from colleges—from the best colleges—do not read books.

Can it be successfully urged that they have had enough of the "classics" to last their times? We should like to hear that argument developed! Can it be argued that there are no new books worthy of their attention? Nonsense! Is it true that the indiscriminate collections of blurbs which purple our advertising pages destroy their appetites, or mislead them into unfortunate purchases, not repeated? Undoubtedly, and we intend to take up this debilitating extravagance later; but the fact is no real answer to our question. If the publishers (unwisely we think) use shot guns it may be their game is swift on the wing of escape from anything that looks like a book.

No, we repeat that there is a failure in American educational methods here more worthy of research than nine out of ten problems that engage the energy of investigators. For an education in reading (literature, history, what you will) that does not lead to continued reading, is an education frustrated and incomplete.

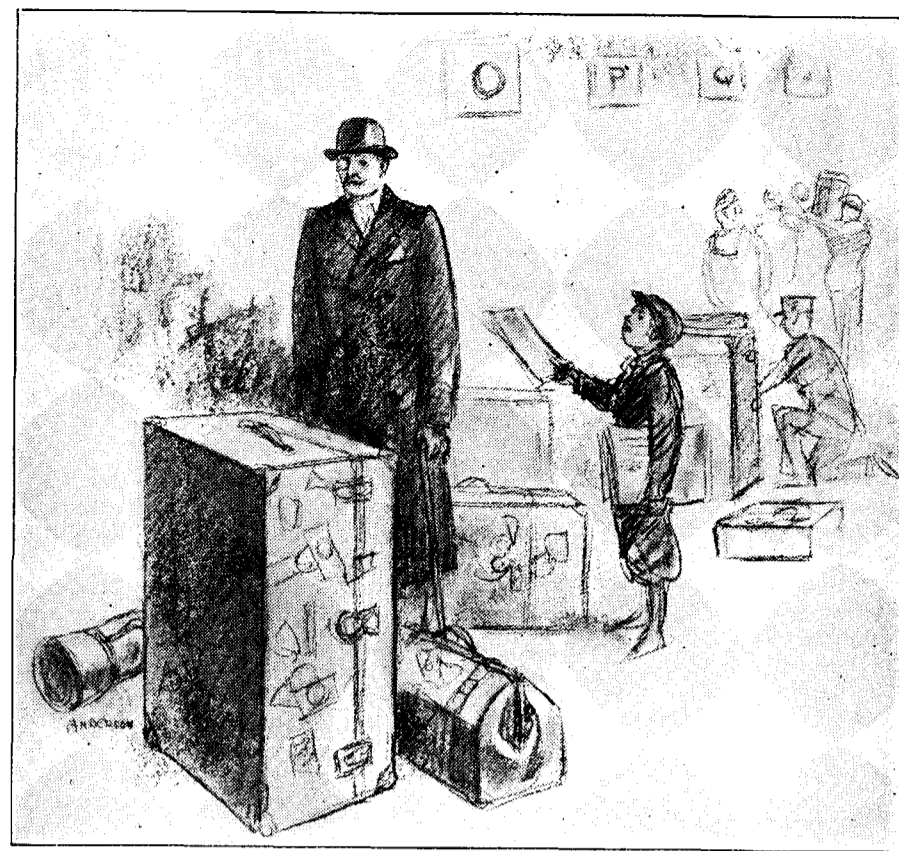
The English departments of our colleges and universities must take more responsibility for this state of affairs than hitherto they have been willing to assume. They have taught literary history well. They have given useful discipline in composition. They have succeeded with their intelligent students (who are all that count in this discussion) in imparting that immensely important sense of background and difference in culture which is one of the important results of good reading, and they have stowed away in the youthful mind useful knowledge of selected works of the great. They have seemingly made book readers of American college women, although it is by no means certain that the colleges deserve the credit. But the departments of English have emphatically failed with American men—with the intelligent, mentally curious men, for no one asks them to make silk purses out of sows' ears.

Does this deplorable state of affairs result from the very emphasis upon literature as a subject of instruction which was intended to lead to very different results? Is it the amount of forcible feeding for examinations which leaves the student satiated, sometimes nauseated, with books? If so, we might profitably go back for light to the experience of the classical college when intensive work upon Latin and Greek undoubtedly produced readers who took to the books in the vulgar tongues with intelligent delight. It may be that the teaching of English literature should be intensive, not extensive, focussed upon a few, a very

few masterpieces, which would stand such labor without disintegration, and that reading should be guided, but voluntary, the tests therein being not upon pages covered but upon whether or not the reader had become a "full man."

Advice is, however, not our province, our duty being to point and wonder. The problem is up to the colleges, who must choose whether or no they wish the best reading class of the country to be the self-educated, who pursue in their adult years the wisdom and delight of books, while the formally educated will summon no energy to seek more than the little they already possess. And it is up squarely and definitely to the departments of English who, though not responsible for what the historians, the philosophers, or the scientists may do to potential readers, are certainly responsible for the reading habits of the undergraduate as much as for his knowledge of literary history.

There was recently sold at Sotheby's in London a hitherto unknown collection of 318 letters written by Napoleon to his second wife, the Empress Marie Louise. The correspondence covers the years 1810 to 1813, describes battles of the period, the retreat from Moscow, and the campaigns in France and Germany.



"ALL ABOUT YOUR IMPRESSIONS OF OUR COUNTRY, SIR."

Letters to the Editor: Gabriel Wells Reviews His Philosophical Ideas

The World Riddle Solved?

SIR:—A curious little book,* by an unaccredited philosopher, has made its unobtrusive, if not exactly modest, appearance some time ago. Being intimately conversant with the author's ideology, the notion has struck me that I should review the book myself, and submit the unconventional product to you by way of challenge to your open-mindedness.

The present review, it is believed, is the only one, except for an uncritical commentary, that has been accorded to the book which appeared under the pretentious title "The Riddle of Being." But, then, there is nothing surprising in that it met with such uncongenial reception. To be original is to be ignored or to be scorned. It took more than a hundred years before Spinoza, for example, began to come into his own. The great Kant was held up to ridicule during his entire lifetime. It has always been thus, more or less. The author was under no illusion about the presumable contemporary fate of his *Weltanschauung*. No new concept can be readily imparted to minds not adequately prepared for it. One might as well expect to be understood if employing a foreign medium of expression. There must be, moreover, a sustained intercourse between mind and mind in the joint pursuit of truth, in order to reach a clear, common understanding.

Odd as it may sound, the book containing a bare twenty-six pages is too long for its pretensions. The author as much as maintains that he is presenting an adequate solution of the World Riddle. Why, in that case, not just put the all-embracing concept in a single word, define it, and offer an appropriate illustration? In fairness, it must be admitted, he actually does all of that, even though with some variation and repetition.

What, then, is the word? *Tendency*. What the definition? *Tendency* is at once rest and motion—both in one. And the illustration? Anything you please—gravitation, radiation, aspiration. In fact, *tendency* is written all over the universe. If all things were not just versions of

* THE RIDDLE OF BEING: A Theory of Correlativity. By Gabriel Wells. Privately Printed.

tendency, but modes of fixity, how could there be any intercourse, or what the author calls "interversion," between them, and consequent unity amid diversity? To take a typical case: Is not respiration a process of interversion: the inner turning into outer; the outer into inner?

Tendency is the ultimate! The ultimacy of a term must stand this three-fold test. It must be simple; it must be inevitable; it must be universally applicable. The author confidently affirms that the term *tendency* fully satisfies these requisites. *Tendency* has, indeed, many names, one of which is *life itself*. But this, as all the other designations such as *urge*, *desire*, *appetition*, *will*, are specialized terms, not universally applicable, except metaphorically; and even so, but approximately.

Professor A. N. Whitehead, the distinguished mathematician and philosopher, avers with considerable emphasis that "process is more fundamental than reality" (meaning by reality, I presume, creation or product). So it is: process is more fundamental than product. Of course—but what is more fundamental than process? *Proclivity*, which is still another name for *tendency*, is more fundamental than process. Is not this entirely logical and plain?

Professor Einstein, who first held that space is finite, now intimates that it may be infinite. Under this author's theory—the theory of correlativity—, according to which all things are inherently interversive, turning into each other—space, equally with its opposite, time, is both finite and infinite. Space does not end, but merely *turns*—turns into its own true opposite, just as matter and force conserve their permanence by turning into each other.

Here is the author's formula:

Nature: *Tendency*=*Existence*
 Method: *Intersivity*=*Subsistence*
 Direction: *Parity*=*Consistence*.

And here the summary: The world is a spiral system of interversive tendencies.

While formally disregarded, the author has yet been favored with polite, sporadic commendations, in personal letters, from

men high in science and philosophy. Some of these appreciations were interspersed with bits of criticisms. But how he craves full-length frontal attacks! He almost resolved, if I may be forgiven this indiscretion, to offer a prize for a refutation from competent quarters, were it in good taste to do so.

As just stated, some incidental criticisms the author did receive: One read: "Why homocentric?" Because all categories unite in man, as the apex of the world order. The center of the universe is not something topical, but integral—that is spiritual. Another: "Why spiral system?" Well, is not evolution a spiral process? Another: "Tendency from what to what?" The answer is: From *tendency* to *tendency* (from dust to dust, as it were). Versions of *tendency* come and go, but *tendency* itself persists. The world's work, in its infinite variety and complexity, is all done between *tendency* raw: nature, and *tendency* refined: spirit.

It is perfectly clear that to the author there is nothing mysterious about the universe. As he states in the Introductory Note, he had come near to making the title "The Obvious Universe." Really?

Are we, thus, to take the author to mean that all the so-named "Unknowables," the questions held transcendental and passing human understanding—as God, immortality, destiny: the whence, whither, and wherefore—are all ready to yield up their secrets in the light of his theory?

The key, he declares, to all the mysteries of the world system lies in the term *intersivity*.

Intersivity is the operative word, and *parity* (adjusted equality) the equative word.

Intersivity is that which makes the All-ness One—the universe.

Well, well! The author may consider himself fortunate to have himself written the book, as otherwise he would be in the same state of bafflement in reading it. He also seems to overlook the fact that men still find it more comfortable to believe than to know. Be it so, then. Precipitation is out of order in an eternal world.

GABRIEL WELLS.

New York City.

Education for Reading

SIR:—We have for some years felt keenly two problems in education. First, that the art of reading so that ideas and thoughts really register in the minds of students is a lost art. Phonetic values, the music and rhythm of prose and poetry, the detection of and emphasis upon key words in sentences and paragraphs—of such things modern students seem to have little knowledge.

The second matter is that English, a generally required course in all years of high school and college work, is about as popular with students as the Eighteenth Amendment was with Al Smith.

FRANK EDDY MADDEN.

El Paso, Texas.

The Saturday Review recommends

This Group of Current Books:

WEEK-END. By PHIL STONG. *Harcourt, Brace*. The story of a week-end house party in Connecticut.

CHESTER A. ARTHUR. By GEORGE FREDERICK HOWE. *Dodd, Mead*. A study of an inconspicuous President.

EARLY VICTORIAN ENGLAND. Edited by G. W. YOUNG. *Oxford University Press*. Two illustrated volumes displaying the Victorian way of life.

This Less Recent Book:

THE ENCHANTED APRIL. By ELIZABETH. *Doubleday, Doran*. A charming story of English people on the Riviera.