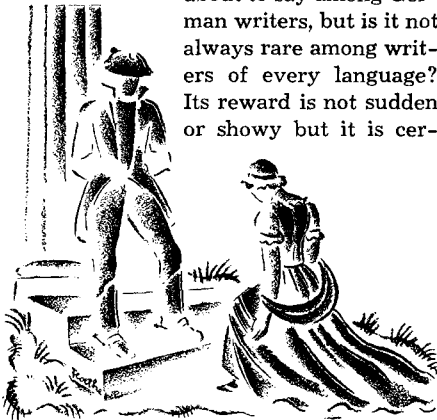


A Glorious Illusion

THE BALLAD OF THE HUNDRED DAYS. By Joseph Roth. New York: The Viking Press. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GARRETT MATTINGLY

A NEW book by Joseph Roth is an event. This Austrian belongs to small company of genuine artists; in his forty-second year he is already one of the notable writers of German prose, perhaps the most notable of his generation. "Flight without End," "Job," "Tarabas," "Radetzky March," each has borne, even in translation, the unmistakable stamp of the craftsman, of effort for a perfection which few novelists seek and fewer still approach. Roth's gift is for simple, deceptively casual statement, for sharp, precise observation, for the one significant detail, so inevitably placed that it never startles or obtrudes, for story that flows naturally, like a brook finding its way among stones, and yet is so cunningly articulated that not until the last page is turned is it seen that every incident is essential, each in its proper place and fulfilling its destined function like the bones and muscles of a well-knit, living body. A great deal must be sacrificed for such exquisite economy. There can be no cloudy rhetoric covering up botched or scamped work, no dazzling set pieces, no auctorial intrusion. The eye must be single, the soul humble, the hand ruthless. A self discipline rigorous enough to achieve such sacrifices is rare—I was about to say among German writers, but is it not always rare among writers of every language? Its reward is not sudden or showy but it is cer-



COVER DESIGN FOR "THE BALLAD OF THE HUNDRED DAYS"

tain: the gratitude and appreciation of a growing circle of readers.

This, the latest, is perhaps, Roth's most nearly perfect book. Its subject permits a narrowing of the focus, to match the characteristic concentration of mood; its art seems defter, surer, more deeply suggestive. A perspective in time has tempered without weakening the intensity of the treatment, and the theme exactly suits Roth's peculiar powers.

The English title reveals the artist's

method. He retells the fall of Napoleon as if he were expanding in prose a ballad of Beranger's. This is another legend of the people, awkwardly wistful, profoundly poignant, the simple story of a laundress who worshipped an emperor whose linen she washed, living in his distant glory more completely than in the loves and sorrows of her own full life. And yet the whole story of the Hundred Days is here. If the author has winnowed acres of memoirs, he has not littered his pages with the chaff. He has not needed the details of cabinet intrigues and military manoeuvres, flags and trumpets and battle pictures full of lifeless, accurate detail. Two bits of pageantry and one glimpse of the Old Guard, marching toward death, are all that suggest the glamour of the time, and even these have also a more important purpose. What is significant, Roth says, in the story of the Hundred Days, is the bond of feeling between the Emperor and the people; he tells the love story of the anonymous millions whose devotion made Napoleon possible, as similar devotion has always made possible the crimes and follies of the great.

He needs for this only two characters: the Emperor himself, and the laundress, Angelma Pietri. Whether Roth's Napoleon, a moody invalid, moving like a man in a nightmare under the compulsion of his destiny, swayed by the vertigo of defeat, sustained by the drug of power, is like the real Napoleon there is no way of knowing. History never reveals men so clearly. But he is a satisfying creation, human, solid, credible, almost contemptible, almost tragic. Angelma Pietri is great. A stupid little peasant, feckless, sentimental, redeemed from vulgarity only by a patient submissiveness and a kind of primitive innocence, she grows with the story, dwarfing the emperor, vaster than empires. In her is reflected, not the real Napoleon, but that armed and glorious illusion whose image drew nations to madness and death. She is the incarnation of the people's blind idolatry. She is, finally, the symbol of that talent of ordinary mankind for heroic sacrifice and selfless devotion, in which, though it has been so often baffled and deluded and turned to destruction, must lie, if anywhere, its salvation. Her story and the emperor's move side by side, barely touching, never interpenetrating (since the Emperor Angelma loves is nothing like the real Napoleon) yet as much one piece as the glass of a mirror and its silver backing, a tiny convex mirror holding a great world.

I have been trying to say that this is a beautiful story, a remarkable piece of craftsmanship—and something more. Joseph Roth is not merely a first rate craftsman; he is a poet. And a poet is continually obliged to create anew his



JOSEPH ROTH

vision of the world, to give his unique insight form and life. If the present has ever been real to him, he cannot, if he would, take refuge in the past. For all the creations of any given poet necessarily resemble one another, are parts of one whole. "The Ballad of the Hundred Days" is as contemporary as its author's previous stories of the Russian revolution, or as (what at times it almost seems to be) a story of a German dictatorship.

Roth's allegiance is still to humility and the rejection of power, the conclusion of his "Job" and "Tarabas" and of the strange essays in "Anti-Christ." You may not like that conclusion. It draws neither on dialectical materialism, nor on nationalist hysteria, nor on a smug, bourgeois complacency about revolution. It is a highly individual, and, finally, a religious and mystical perception, like the perceptions of many other poets. But it is expressed by an artist, and if the art of fiction means anything to you, you had better read Joseph Roth. Those who have not begun to do so will find "The Ballad of the Hundred Days" a good introduction. The translation is admirable, English prose worthy of the distinction of its original.

Good Adventure

ODYSSEY OF THE ISLANDS. By Carl N. Taylor. New York: Charles A. Scribner's Sons. 1936. \$3.

WITH neither vainglory nor any ostensible mission Carl Taylor criss-crossed the Philippine archipelago from northern Luzon to the Sulu Sea, seeking adventure for its own sake, and quite incidentally acquiring more knowledge of these wild lands than have most deliberate travelers before him. It is a sort of gruelling pleasure for the arm-chair traveler to follow this unillusioned young man along the jungle trails. His is excellent description that never palls because it is unself-conscious and sincere.

Memoranda on Americans

THE PEOPLE, YES. By Carl Sandburg.
New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

CARL SANDBURG, still one of our leading poets, is now within two years of sixty, but you'd never know it from the vigor of his verse. Not content with having given us some of the most vital experimentation in poetry of our time, as well as ventures into valuable biography, tales for children, and collections of native American folk-song, he has now cut loose with a long poem about the American people which has everything in it including the kitchen stove.

Payments on the car, the bungalow, the radio, the electric icebox, accumulated interest on loans for past payments, the writhing point of where the money will come from, Crime thrown in their eyes from every angle, crimes against property and person, crime in the prints and films, crime as a lurking shadow ready to spring into reality, crime as a method and a technique,

Comedy as an offset to crime, the laughmakers, the odd numbers in the news and the movies, original clowns and imitators, and in the best you never know what's coming next even when it's hokum.

And sports, how a muff in the seventh lost yesterday's game and how now they're learning to hit Dazzy's fade-away ball and did you hear how Foozly plowed through that line for a touchdown this afternoon?

And daily the death toll of the speed wagons; a cripple a minute in fenders, wheels, steel and glass splinters; a stammering witness before a coroner's jury, "It happened so sudden I don't know what happened."

"The people, yes, the people," it seems to go on indefinitely. But as it goes on it gets deeper. There is a hypnotic cadence to Sandburg's loose-jointed free verse. He likes catalogues of people and things almost as much as Whitman did, but his is a different view. For one thing his tone is not so much exuberant as ominous. He looks at all the crooks and the cheaters and the exploiters and the pursy hypocrites with a flinty eye. He tells 'em—he tells 'em. . . .

He weaves into his verse every old anecdote and adage he has come across—cracker-barrel, horse-swapping, each, any, and every pithy expression. He summarizes well this Alice-in-Wonderland America in which we live.

"I came to a country,"
said a wind-bitten vagabond,
"Where I saw shoemakers barefoot
saying they had too many shoes.
I met carpenters living outdoors
saying they had built too many houses.
Clothing workers I talked with,
bushelmen and armhole-basters,
said their coats were on a ragged edge

because they had made too many coats.
And I talked with farmers, yeomanry,
the backbone of the country,
so they were told,
saying they were in debt and near starvation
because they had gone ahead like always

And raised too much wheat and corn
too many hogs, sheep, cattle.
When I said, 'You live in a strange country,'
they answered slow, like men
who wouldn't waste anything, not even language:
'You ain't far wrong there, young feller.'



CARL SANDBURG

From "On Parade," by Eva Herrmann
(Coward-McCann)

We're going to do something, we don't know what."

He says again, with a swell fixed grin in the corner of his mouth:

The rights of property are guarded
by ten thousand laws and fortresses.
The right of a man to live by his work—
what is this right?
and why does it clamor?
and who can hush it
so it will stay hushed?
and why does it speak
and though put down speak again
with strengths out of the earth?

He sees the American people as "wanters" and hoppers." And Heaven knows he sees them as dumb in every sense. Which is entirely true. No people are cheated worse than the American people. None are bigger suckers to stand for what they stand for . . . Sandburg speaks of the greatest showman on earth and of how the people love to be humbugged. He collects sayings of the people, making shrewd capital of their half-wittedness.

"Which way to the post-office, boy?"
"I don't know." "You don't know much, do you?" "No, but I ain't lost."

That is an old story, of course, but a

characteristically American one. Sandburg has collected hundreds of such stories and sayings. They all add up to America and the American people. Here are the myths of America, such as Paul Bunyan—here are the "drummer's yarns" (of the milder type), here are the characteristically local expressions. Here are old stories out of the daily news. Wisdom, mirth, and myth. Slang—tons of it.

Even,—marvel of marvels!—I find here imbedded my favorite Irish joke of long years' standing:

"Men, will yez fight or will yez run?"
"We will."
"Yez will what?"
"We will not."
"I t'ought yez would."

Yes, that is how the People laugh; and, as Sandburg says, it is also how the people laughed when the radio operator in the North Atlantic on a storm-lashed sinking Scandinavian ship, sent the message:

"This is no night to be out without an umbrella."

But, for all this mélange, the long sprawly poem—and in spite of all the above things in it (which make it somewhat resemble Hungarian goulash!) it is a poem on the whole, deepens into some fine sayings toward the end:

The public has a mind?
Yes
And men can follow a method
and a calculated procedure
for drugging and debauching it?
Yes.
And the whirlwind comes later?
Yes.

Is there a time to repeat,
"The living passion of millions can rise into a whirlwind: the storm once loose who can ride it? you? or you? or you? only history, only tomorrow knows for every revolution breaks as a child of its own convulsive hour shooting patterns never told beforehand?"

I should say the main criticism of Sandburg's long effort, interesting as parts of it are, is that it has not enough cohesion. It has not enough structure. And, certainly it does not think through, as does the modern radical economist, the situation in which modern civilization finds itself. Sandburg is too interested in the half-tones of humanity, the highlights of humor, the terse queerness. He is interested in "atmosphere." He has in him the wisdom of an ancient race. And "The People, Yes," is a good book to pick up and read at—but an annoying book if you wish it really to get anywhere. Where have the People got or where are they getting, he might answer? But today, it seems at least to one reviewer, that they have definitely reached a much clearer idea than ever before of where they are at and how to get that from which they have been disinherited for so long. That new sapience, it seems to me, is what Sandburg fails to show.