

Letters to the Editor: *Cooper and the Schools; Santayana and Amiel*

Cooper Memorial

SIR:—For a long time, I have felt that we should do something in a substantial way to show the Board of Education that we appreciate the fact that they have named several Public Schools in honor of American men and women who have attained fame as writers.

With this in view, I found a few friends who still remember the thrills they experienced in their boyhood in the reading and rereading of the *Leather Stocking Tales* of Cooper. So I raised a little fund and we have purchased a bronze tablet of about 26 x 56 inches in which will be set a portrait of Cooper done on bronze and etched in 24-K gold, and in cooperation with and with the enthusiastic approval of Dr. George J. Ryan, President of the Board of Education, this tablet will be erected in the James Fenimore Cooper Junior High School at 116th Street west of 5th Avenue, and we hope to have it dedicated about March first.

It appears to me altogether fitting that we should make this acknowledgement of Cooper's position in American literature because I was not only greatly surprised but impressed in some of my foreign travels to find that the *Leather Stocking Tales* are perhaps the best known and often the only known American fiction in many of the countries where one would least expect it; such as Persia, Turkey, Russia, and the Orient.

I hope that the dedication of the tablet will deserve and receive much general publicity, and it will naturally follow easily that we can erect similar memorials to Edgar Allan Poe and half a dozen others in schools that are already named, and then recommend to the Board of Education the naming of still more schools after American writers.

MARK O. PRENTISS.

Mr. Prentiss informs us that since writing this letter he has formed a sponsoring committee for the Cooper Memorial which includes Van Wyck Brooks, Christopher Morley, William McFee, Edward Hungerford, Will Irwin, Lowell Thomas, William Lyon Phelps, James Thurber, Harry Elmer Barnes, Robert E. Spiller, with Henry Seidel Canby as chairman.

An American Amiel

SIR:—I am prompted to observe how strange it is that no critic or reviewer has seen the similitude of "The Last Puritan" to Amiel's "Journal Intime." Oliver Alden more nearly resembles in his soul struggles, in the tyranny which his intellect exerts upon him, it appears to me, Henry Frederic Amiel, than the hero of "The Way of All Flesh" or even of "Marius the Epicurean," though the similitude in these latter cases is not inapt. Though no critic has so described him, Oliver is an American Amiel, unable to reconcile the life of thought with the life of action. He was affected with what Gautier, years ago in the *Mercure de France*, was pleased to describe as *la maladie d'Idéal*, another manifestation



"LET'S GO SOMEWHERE QUIETER. THAT BASSOON IS MAKING
A HELL OF A NOISE."

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of which Gautier described as "Bovaryism," with what affinity is evident.

Oliver is a Protestant Puritan, as was Amiel, for there are acknowledgedly Catholic Puritans, too, of a different stripe. Oliver lacks the intellectual, but not the emotional tolerance of Amiel. He has his same sensuous response to nature and beauty, but Oliver was less reclusal than Amiel. He saved himself by complete retreat from the reality which Oliver was too little able to face or effect. Amiel's retreat saved him, at least corporeally. Oliver destroyed himself by continuous attempt to orient himself to conditions. Amiel shunned them, and dreamed.

ANNE WHELAN.

New Haven, Conn.

Daniel D. Home

SIR: I am engaged on a critical study of the career of Daniel Dunglas Home, the spiritualist, who died in 1886. I should be very grateful for any material, letters, or portraits, which will be returned.

HORACE WYNDHAM.

2 Whitehall Court,
London, England.

The Author of "Prue and I"

SIR: About two years ago your column kindly carried a notice of my proposed critical biography of George W. Curtis, American essayist, orator, and civil service reformer of the nineteenth century.

I was surprised at the warm response on the part of lovers of Curtis from Massachusetts to Iowa, many of whom sent me unpublished letters and other data of Mr. Curtis. Since I am using this proposed biography as a Ph.D. dissertation,

I am anxious to make the research as thorough as possible. Would you be kind enough to request again for me any unpublished letters of the author of "Prue and I" or other material that could be used by me? I assure your readers that any material placed at my disposal will be preserved and returned to the owners.

FRANKLIN T. WALKER.

Mississippi College,
Clinton, Miss.

William Morris

SIR:—The undersigned is engaged in the preparation of a book on William Morris and begs the hospitality of your columns to inquire whether some of your readers may be in possession of unpublished letters or clippings, or out of print pamphlets, containing statements relative to Mr. Morris's views concerning socialism, anarchism, or communism—or to his relations with socialists, anarchists, and communists. If so, possibly some arrangements could be made to secure copies of the material.

LLOYD WENDELL ESHLEMAN.

121 East 77th Street,
New York City.

William James Linton

SIR: I am at present preparing a biographical study of William James Linton, wood-engraver and poet of the nineteenth century. I should greatly appreciate hearing from any persons who may have correspondence or other original material relating to him in connection with his political or artistic or literary work.

FRASER NEIMAN.

192 Upland Road,
Cambridge, Mass.

Notes for an Autobiography

PREFACE TO THE PAST. By James Branch Cabell. New York: Robert M. McBride & Co. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

FROM this volume, fittingly and heart-warmingly dedicated to Guy Holt, we may learn as much as the author wishes us to know of the history of the making of James Branch Cabell's books. We may read also of their adventures as completed manuscripts, and of their fates after publication. In these pages, too, some persons may enjoy their first encounter with Mr. Cabell's often reiterated theories regarding his own literary practice, while other persons will contemplate those same theories for perhaps the twentieth time. Lastly, we find here numerous passages in which the author has his characteristic say about other authors, about publishers, magazine editors, censors, reviewers, and about diverse aspects of the literary life as it is lived in America. Here, then, are notes for the autobiography of a man of letters,—facts, figures, explanations, reminiscences, and opinions; but not a whole autobiography by any means, for no more is told of the man than is essential to the tale of his writings.

This is a new book only in the sense that it is newly compounded, and addressed to a more numerous body of readers than can be reached by an expensive, limited edition running to many volumes. It is "made up largely of the revised and edited prefaces to the Storisende edition of the 'Biography of the Life of Manuel,'" to which have been added a few germane papers elsewhere published. Indeed, its only hitherto unprinted portion is the nine-page "Addenda as to Jurgen," in which Burton Rascoe is blandly chided for having made public, without permission, a confidential letter written by Jurgen's creator in 1919.

James Branch Cabell's readers are well acquainted with his insistence (here renewed) that the novels, short stories, essays, poems, book reviews, genealogy, and drama which compose the eighteen volumes of the Storisende edition are a "Biography" of the life of Manuel, as that life found expression through Manuel himself and through his descendants, during seven centuries and twenty-three generations, in several countries and in many places "not yet enregistered upon our stodgily backward school maps," nor, indeed, upon any maps save those sketched by an author's imagination. The Biography, we are told, is chiefly concerned with three attitudes towards life, or with three tentative solutions of the problem of existence—the chivalrous, the gallant, and the poetic—as they are manifest in the continuing and multiplying

life of Manuel. Fundamentally the protagonist does not change from book to book, but remains "very much the same blundering male ape, reft of his tail and grown rusty at climbing." In no matter what incarnation, he comes at last to "the same comedic ending upon, at happiest, a resignatory question mark." And this eternal repetition is "the strong connecting thread of the Biography, just as this same eternal repetition has given solidarity to all human living ever since men first discovered those three great commonplaces which are called love and marriage and death."

It is an author's amusing fancy, you may say, this pretending that so many volumes of miscellaneous writing are really a single book, planned and of a piece. Surely, the conception was not in young Mr. Cabell's mind when, at the beginning of the century, he began to write romantic stories to be illustrated by Howard Pyle? Doubtless it was not, nor for long afterward. But the fancy has been translated into something very like substantial fact by dint of twenty-eight years of active creation and cunning tinkering. That Mr. Cabell did not suspect he was Manuel's biographer when he composed "The Line of Love" and other volumes, and that he had later to rewrite and reshape those books so that they would fit into his total scheme, does not stultify his view of his own work. Nor does it matter just when or why, or how tardily, the idea of the Biography came to him. Come it did; and for better or for worse, after his own fashion, and avowedly for his own diversion, he has made that idea real. The reality stands before us, as solid proof that few American authors have labored more devotedly or more ambitiously than James Branch

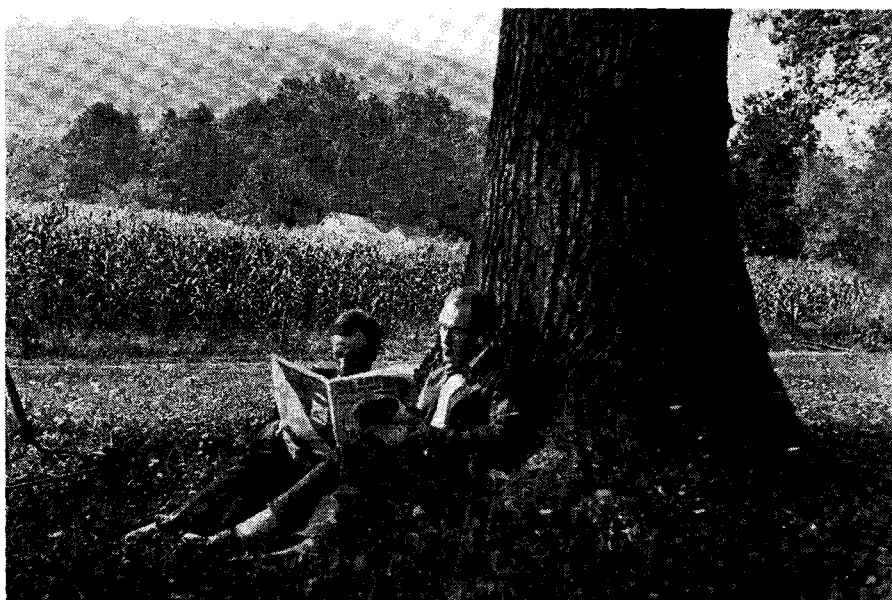
Cabell. One cannot read "Preface to the Past" without trying to evaluate the product of all this labor.

To put it bluntly, Mr. Cabell's reputation is now at a low ebb. It is just as unfashionable to admire his books today as it was fashionable to admire them a few years ago. All the silly people who pride themselves upon their immediately correct response to the latest best-seller, all the reviewers who hop on and off band-wagons with an agility that betokens a lightness of mind as well as of limb, have learned to dismiss any reference to Cabell and his works with a shrug. He is old stuff. Even worse, to many his name recalls an enthusiasm that can be remembered only with embarrassment.

For an author to lose the suffrage of such readers is no loss at all. But there are other readers and critics, of unquestionable sincerity and intelligence, to whom the name of Cabell is anathema. Eloquent among them is Granville Hicks. In "The Great Tradition," he has written:

The artist has a function in this mad world, Mr. Cabell argues; it is to create beautiful illusions, which alone make life endurable. But, far from occupying himself with the dissemination of dynamic lies, Mr. Cabell has devoted all his talents to attacking men's illusions. He is, then, a fraud; in fact, he is doubly a fraud, for neither his romanticism nor his pessimism is genuine. He is a sleek, smug egoist, whose desire to be a gentleman of the old school breeds dissatisfaction with the existing order, but who has not enough imaginative vigor to create a robust world in which deeds of chivalry and gallantry are performed.

These are harsh words, and they have a surprisingly Calvinistic ring; surprisingly, until one remembers that Marxism resembles Calvinism both in fervor and intolerance, and that the one is as strict as the other in delimiting the pleasures and thinking of the faithful. It is not remarkable that Mr. Hicks, as a Marxist,



SINCLAIR LEWIS AND JAMES BRANCH CABELL