

# Prophetic Autobiography

ESCAPE TO THE PRESENT. By Johannes Steel. New York. Farrar & Rinehart. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by EUGENE LYONS

JOHANNES STEEL erupted on the journalistic horizon of New York in the spring of 1934 with a shrewd forecast of blood-letting in the Nazi ranks which was proved substantially accurate by the purge of June 30. Thereafter, as a sort of *Wunderkind* foreign editor of the *New York Post*, he continued in the trade of prognosticator, surely the most hazardous of professions. His guesses remained consistently shrewd but not always accurate. They led him to an indiscretion in prophecy which he called "The Second World War." Undaunted, Mr. Steel in the present autobiographical volume maintains the prophetic strain, but on a universal scale and without time limitations, which makes it much safer.

The gist of his thesis is that Europe is hopeless, morally and economically bankrupt, and in general moribund; and that the centers of civilization and culture are shifting rapidly eastward and westward—to the Orient and to the Americas. There is no need to accept the prophecy literally in order to admit that it holds true for thousands of individual young Europeans whose lives have been cut at the roots and set adrift by events in these last years. Johannes Steel is of this homeless company. In "Escape to the Present," summarizing his own life's story, he shows forcefully how one young German found existence under Hitler's dispensation intolerable and decided to begin it anew in America. He has changed worlds, deliberately and in the full knowledge of the seriousness of his choice.

Whatever future historians may say about his larger assumptions, they are at least poignantly valid in his own case. Fascinating as sheer adventure, Mr. Steel's story achieves symbolic grandeur because his private destiny is so intimately related to the main currents of recent history: the World War, the chaotic aftermath, the totalitarian reaction. There is a certain flamboyance about the author's temper and a certain recklessness about his generalizations. Nevertheless, at its core his personal experience is true and significant, and he has recorded it with a great deal of charm, skill, and gusto.

Like so many other young people from the fascist lands, Mr. Steel has replanted his life in America and he is frankly amazed how quickly and firmly it has taken to the new soil. "I have taken out my first papers," is the triumphant theme song of his autobiography. He marvels at the hospitality and the eager curiosity and

the fresh energy that he has met in going through our country as a reporter and lecturer. Already, in less than three years, he begins to feel himself an American. But unlike other exiles in our midst, his transfer was a conscious choice. He is not a Jew, and despite some dabbling in Social Democratic politics he might have merged himself with Nazi Germany had he wished to do so. His cleavage with the current phobias of his homeland was deeper than race or politics—it was fundamentally cultural. He was the European man refusing to sink himself into the primordial slime of the know-nothing fascist retreat to barbarism, purposefully seeking a climate congenial for survival and finding it in the United States.

Besides being a document of our times, "Escape to the Present" is also a document of an unusually exciting individual career. Among the youthful autobiographers whose books are coming thick and fast these days—Mr. Steel is apparently in his early thirties—there are many who went forth to seek adventure and found it in full measure. This young German, on the contrary, seems to have been sought out by adventure. The most that can be said is that it found him always ready and coöperative. He seems to have moved in an aura of remarkable coincidence and sudden dangers.

A casual meeting and a dream threw him at a tender age into the maelstrom of fevered finance on the Black Bourse of his native town during the German inflation. Later he was catapulted into economic espionage for the Weimar Republic on several continents, including North and South America. He sold left-over German war materials on a contraband basis in the Near East and the Far East, in years replete with providential meetings, hair-breadth escapes, and routine melodrama. An accidental encounter with Herr Schacht, the financial dictator, in a post office during the first week of Hitler's reign led to an invitation to enter the Foreign Department of the Nazi party. "If you consider this proposal," Dr. Alfred Rosenberg, head of that department, promised, "you may be Under-Secretary of State inside of five years." Having disdained this offer, Mr. Steel was arrested and jailed. How he brained a sleeping Nazi guard and stole across the frontier to France is among the more thrilling of the assorted thrills.

Mr. Steel's story will be read by many for its sheer excitement. Even more will read it, this reviewer trusts, for the more fundamental adventure of an intelligent and ambitious young man who chose to defy the tides of fascism in Germany and to make himself a new home across the seas. "Escape to the Present" is integral with our epoch, and therefore instructive as well as exciting.



FROM THE JACKET OF "WAR ON SATURDAY WEEK"

## Thunder of the Guns

WAR ON SATURDAY WEEK. By Ruth Adam. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by LOUIS J. HALLE, JR.

IN reviewing Mrs. Adam's novel one is reminded of the expert who wrote a book proving that war was impossible and whose publishers rushed it through the press so that it should appear before war actually did break out. A few years ago this novel, which deals with the life of an English family in the present pre-war period and ends with the thunder of the first guns, would have seemed fantastic. Tomorrow it will be out of date. It is strictly a novel of today.

The Lawsons, Norah, Mary, Cedric, and John, were children at the time of the late war, living in the village Rectory as rectors' children have lived for generations in Merrie England. The world they were born into was the old world of order and security; the world they grew up to was a world of anarchy, tyranny, and sudden death. The mental strain of the war-threat and its effect on the various characters is the burden of the novel. One takes refuge in communism, another in a glittering army uniform; a third, who represents moderation, takes no refuge and finally has his head bashed in by clashing fascist and communist mobs.

Mrs. Adam doesn't definitely represent England as going fascist. But in one scene Mosley's blackshirts are shown coöperating with the London police to put down a communist rising. Again, a pacifist society is ordered by the government to dissolve. The author offers no solutions. She merely observes, in a spirit of detached amazement, and allows her observations to be their own comment. She is clever enough to keep her political and social picture of the future vague, and has thus attained a degree of plausibility that most prophetic books lack.

# Seven Men Talking

CONVERSATION AT MIDNIGHT. By Edna St. Vincent Millay. New York: Harper and Brothers. 1937. \$2.

Reviewed by LOUIS UNTERMEYER

MISS MILLAY has accomplished the seemingly impossible; the poet most applauded for her unaffected lyricism has written a book that is as prosy as it is pretentious. The pretentiousness is of a new and curious kind. Until now Miss Millay has always spoken in character; she has alternately used the voice of the precocious, subtle child and the mind of the experienced, disillusioned woman. Now, for some occult reason, she has decided to express herself like a man—like seven men, to be exact. The result is "Conversation at Midnight," which Miss Millay indicates should be taught of in terms of the theatre and for which the author has suggested stage directions, provided three intermissions, and added an index of first lines of distinct poems and "subjects under discussion." The discussions are the poems, and vice versa. There are even two introductions: one explaining the character of the book; one explaining the characters themselves.

The characters are seven: Merton, "a distinguished-looking man of sixty-eight, a stock-broker, very wealthy; he has traveled extensively, and collected some famous and valuable paintings. . . . He is a conservative and votes Republican." John, "a painter, considered to be exceptionally gifted, but financially unsuccessful. . . . He votes, when not too disheartened to vote at all, Democrat." Pygmalion, the nickname of a writer of short stories for popular magazines, who does not bother to vote. Carl, a poet and communist. Father Anselmo, a Roman Catholic priest and a pianist. Ricardo, "son of an Italian petty nobleman and an American woman, a liberal and an agnostic." Lucas, the youngest, hard-boiled and idealistic, a writer of advertising copy. Seven characters in search of a plot. They talk. The time is the present; the place New York; the scene is the elegant drawing-room of Ricardo's house on Tenth Street off Fifth Avenue; there are three royal-blue Sèvres vases, and the wood in the fireplace is brought from New Mexico. The men talk. In the first of the four parts they talk about shooting; dog-breeding; pheasant-raising; women; fads; the shorter working-day; love; rich relations; the kinship between sounds and colors (yellow is the key of D); the desiccation of the five senses; the danger of airplanes; electric refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, and other Modern Noises; mouth-washes and syndicated superlatives; corruption; the English language; sin, patriotism, and virtue; self-doubt and

faith; the superiority of animals to man; God; the excellence of Chateau Lafite; the overcrowded condition of Germany, Italy, and Japan; war and revolution; Bach and Stravinsky. . . . It is soon evident that these are not conversations, but a series of monologues in which the utterance is as haphazard as the thought. The names are tags, not characters; the lines are delivered with so little sense of individuality that the reader is continually confused. The confusion is increased by the mixture of idioms; at one moment Miss Millay makes her dialecticians discourse in her favorite Elizabethan accent, at another she has them unconsciously imitate Ogden Nash.



Nation-Wide News Service  
EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

How can Stravinsky know how Pygmalion feels about music, any more than Pygmalion knows how Stravinsky feels?

Personally, I never could get excited about musicians; I don't think they're genuine; I think they're a lot of rhinestone heels.

Thus ends the first part. Two pages later Miss Millay, comes right out in the open and acknowledges the influence—"as Ogden Nash might put it." She takes up her attack on women with a trio for Merton, Pygmalion, and Lucas, which continues for some forty lines, and from that point on it is difficult for Miss Millay to keep Nash out of the poem, or play, or polemic, or whatever she is about. Jeffers enters also partly by way of quotation, partly by way of philosophy, and the MacLeish of "Panic" and "Public Speech" is sometimes echoed. But though she may share the Californian's pessimism, Miss Millay lacks the full-throated vigor of Jeffers, and though she attempts to dramatize (as her publisher asserts) "the whole of modern life" she does not begin to have the intellectual power nor the

technical skill of MacLeish. Her failure to be other people is emphasized by her failure to be herself. The few passages of authentic Millay are in two of the lyrics and in the renewal of the note of desperate frustration which marked this volume's immediate predecessor, which someone suggested should have been called "Whine from these Gripes." But, except for infrequent lines, both the accent and the emphasis are wrong; the tone is either flat or hysterical. Here, for example, is a conversational sonnet:

You speak, my friend, in most ecstatic terms  
Of life upon this negligible sphere;  
An excellent protein, doubtless, for the worms,  
Is Man,—but food for thought?—are you sincere?  
It's true, at times a not inglorious figure  
Leaps to a wave-crest and harangues the waves:  
The Ship of State sails on, from fore to jigger  
Her dirty decks aswarm with thieves and slaves.

I must confess, these recent altercations  
Within the Left, between the Left and Right,  
Have nipped somewhat my autumn aspirations  
Toward Comradeship,—a budded thing, though slight.  
Now, for your borshch of bullet-lead and jam  
I would not give a tax-exempted damn.

It is all wrong—wrong touch, wrong feeling, most of all, wrong tone. Admirers of the artlessness in the early sonnets and the skilled artifice in the later sequence, "Fatal Interview," will be amazed at the involved awkwardness. Apart from its inappropriateness and its worthlessness as a sonnet, it is typical of the entire work. Miss Millay pretends to flash light on a man's world, but it is still the world of a child—a sensitive, angry, and confused child who has heard (or rather, overheard) scattered arguments which she tries to reassemble and join. She knows that verse can not only wing its way into the heart, but work its way into the mind, that poetry can talk as well as sing. But Miss Millay cannot make her men talk with any conviction, for she can create neither real controversy nor actual character. She is not a thinker, though she tries hard to be one; she is intuitive, not intellectual. When she relies unhappily on intellect she falls back upon clichés of thought as well as stereotypes of expression. She has written more uneven books, but, in all the fourteen volumes, she has never been so insistently discursive and so consistently dull.

Dirge-like though this review may be, it is too early to toll the bell. Miss Millay has been buried many times since the metaphysical interment in "Renascentence," and she has survived. Unless she has lost her remarkable exuberance, her play of wit and tune, of pointed music and meaning, she will survive again.