



VAN GOGH'S PAINTING OF HIS HOUSE AT ARLES

up collections at his meetings. The "mystery," however, was completely cleared up by a pair of courageous and likable colored houseworkers, Thomas and Verinda Brown, who announced last Spring that they had given him all their worldly wealth before the veil fell from their eyes and they quit the angelic life. They said that all the other "angels" also turned over their earnings, but that Father ordered secrecy. Angels feared he would "take their spirit away," i.e., kill them by telepathy, if they were disloyal even in thought. Thomas and Verinda, in Father's own words, "iterated and reiterated" their story. They gave it to *The New Yorker* last spring and that magazine used it in a study of Father Divine. They furnished affidavits to William Lesselbaum, a lawyer who was suing Father last November (God alleged he was destitute). Parker quotes vast gobs of their affidavits. Other angels split off and demanded the return of their funds. It was the suit of one of these angels which led to the stabbing of a white process server when he invaded the "Heaven" on 115th St. last month.

Without his mysterious altruism as a selling point, it appears doubtful that Divine will gain new adherents. The number of the old ones, as Parker indicates, is limited to perhaps 5,000. As opportunities for employment outside the totalitarian community increase, the number of these remaining angels will decline. Parker, although acute through most of his story, remarks on "an unexplained accession of interest" in the cult in 1930. That was the first year of the depression. When hard times come again we will grow a new crop of Messiahs. This appears to be the definitive book on this one.

## Van Gogh's Letters

DEAR THEO, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF VINCENT VAN GOGH. Edited by Irving Stone. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1937. \$3.75.

Reviewed by OLIVER LARKIN

NOW that color prints of the *Sunflowers* are as eagerly bought as *September Morn* and Whistler's *Mother*, Vincent's canonization is complete. Beside each canvas in the recent Museum of Modern Art exhibition of Van Gogh were placed pertinent quotations chosen from the more than six hundred letters written to his brother Theo, and after Theo's death arranged and translated by the latter's widow. Her three volumes, containing one of the most profound self-revelations ever made by one man to another, have long since been out of print. Irving Stone, author of the biographical novel "Lust for Life," has made a one-volume condensation, attempting "to keep in every line Vincent wrote that has retained its beauty, significance, and importance, and to eliminate the countless pages of repetition, unimportant detail, and comment which have since lost both meaning and value." Stone's elimination of tiresome financial discussion, of reference to painters and to works of art which would be meaningless to the layman, and of those phrases in which, almost word for word, Van Gogh repeated himself, is a real service to the reader.

Condensation on this scale, however, means distortion. The successive crises in Vincent's life consumed more time, his development as an artist was more gradual and more complex, than this more

summary version can convey. One also regrets Stone's failure to include, except in fragments, pages in which Van Gogh revealed with extraordinary insight the relation between artistic and social decadence in the eighties, his prophetic vision of a new art and a new world for the artist—paragraphs comparing '84 with '48 and Guizot with Michelet, describing the involuntary grouping of people on either side of invisible barricades, the final difference between his own revolutionary attitude and that of conservative Theo. Such lines would go far to correct our one-sided picture of Van Gogh the abnormal and defiant individual. Questionable also is the editor's rearrangement of sentences and paragraphs within the letters, a regrouping which makes smoother reading but takes unwarranted liberty with the often erratic but highly characteristic sequence of the painter's thought.

But every page of Mr. Stone's 572 supports his opinion "that Vincent was as great a writer and philosopher as he was a painter, that he was endowed with one of the most comprehensive gifts of understanding and expression that it has ever been the burden of one man to carry." Here is the disillusioned churchman—"that icy coldness bewitched me in my youth,"—who could see that respectable mores were "perfectly absurd things which make of society a kind of lunatic asylum, a perfectly topsy-turvy world"; who profoundly knew the character of his sitters, old Père Tanguy, blue-coated Postman Roulin "who argues with such sweep in the style of Garibaldi," bearing "a silent gravity and tenderness for me like what an old soldier might have for a young man." Here is Van Gogh the inspired colorist, trying "to express the love of two lovers by a marriage of two complementary colors, their mingling and their opposition"; the luminous critic who remarked that a "meditative" figure by Rubens, in comparison with one by Rembrandt, "becomes a person who has retired to a corner for purposes of digestion," and who answered a critic of his own distortions by writing:

Tell Serret that . . . if one photographed a digger he certainly would not appear to be digging. . . . Tell him that my great longing is to learn to make those very incorrectnesses, those deviations, remodellings, changes of reality, that they may become—yes, untruth if you like—but more true than the literal truth.

Theo treasured his brother's letters because he alone knew Vincent's greatness, sensed that "it would be really a remarkable book if one could see how much he has thought and how he remained himself." That judgment and that faith are now once more vindicated in "Dear Theo," an unintentional self-portrait of the Artist as a Man.

Oliver Larkin is in the department of art at Smith College.

# New Power for Poetry

*THE FALL OF THE CITY.* By Archibald MacLeish. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc. 1937. 50 cents.

Reviewed by LOUIS UNTERMAYER

IT is partly Mr. MacLeish's own fault that his work has so often been appraised as a form, an extension of a theory, an exercise in technique. Mr. MacLeish has said in prose and implied in poetry that a poem exists in time and space independent of its origin and even of its subject, that emotion has little to do with poetry, and that the very test of a poem is its power to withstand emotion. His famous line that "a poem should not mean but be" has been quoted, misapplied, and used to prove that Mr. MacLeish believes in a purely abstract art, a detached and completely isolated poetry for poetry's sake.

This is a pity, for Mr. MacLeish's creative work has suffered because of his occasional theorizing. It has provoked controversy instead of appreciation; it has incited a few writers where it should have roused a great number of readers. This is all the more regrettable, for Mr. MacLeish the poet is not only a wiser person than Mr. MacLeish the theorist, but a much more stimulating one.

"The Fall of the City" is the latest contribution to the small literature of modern poetic drama, and it will probably be accorded the same reception which has marked the publication of Mr. MacLeish's recent collections. Leftists and rightists will quarrel about his allegiance; technicians will trace the ancestry of his diction and the novelty of its use. But it is to be hoped that no one will fail to emphasize the power of this poet's imagination and its magnificent immediacy. For one thing, this is a drama primarily for the ear rather than for the eye, the first American play in verse written for the

radio. For another thing, the theme is perhaps the timeliest as well as the most violently debated in the world today.

The action, crisply described by the Announcer and elaborated by voices of messengers, orators, priests, and the crowd, takes place in the central plaza of a great city. Portents are in the air; a dead woman appears and prophesies. She tells them, not knowing what the words mean, that masterless men will take a master. The crowd is puzzled and fearful. A messenger appears warning the city that a ruthless conqueror is upon them. Orators, priests, and generals harangue the crowd, increasing uncertainty and inaction. Finally the conqueror appears; he comes out of the shadows and takes command. His visor opens and the Announcer tells the listeners that there is no one in the armor; the metal is only a shell, absolutely empty; "the push of a stiff pole at the nipple would topple it." But the people lie on the ground. They do not or will not see. They shout as though they had won a victory; the masterless men have found a master. The city falls.

Here, obviously, is an important and even tremendous subject, and the first hearing indicates that Mr. MacLeish has not missed a single dramatic opportunity. An examination of the printed work confirms the first impression. Here are all the technical excellences: the alternating shifts in accent; the adroit juxtaposition of oratory and plain speech; the variations of rhyme, assonance, and dissonance; above all, the atmosphere of suspense which this poet can communicate so well. The play is one mounting tension, thrilling in its evocation of terror and fatality. The reader is convinced that these are events, not images, that "the people invent their oppressors," and that, with the fall of the city, "the long labor of liberty" is ended.

The effectiveness of this verse play is

increased by Mr. MacLeish's recognition of the resources of the radio and his employment of the Announcer as a combination of Greek Chorus and casual commentator. Writing for the radio, he has indicated a new power for poetry in the use of the word in action, without props or settings, the allusively spoken word and the "word-excited imagination." It is an exciting prospect, this new appeal directly to the ear, the ear which is "already half poet," and it is an experiment which is also a distinguished accomplishment.

## A Living Tapestry

*A CARDINAL OF THE MEDICI.* By Susan Hicks Beach. New York: Cambridge University Press (Macmillan). 1937. \$3.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

SEVERAL of the best-loved volumes in my library are the "Memoirs of the Dukes of Urbino," and in them the encyclopedic Dennistoun refers to the sojourn of Giuliano de' Medici at the court of Urbino, when "there was born to him a son, who, after being exposed in the streets in 1511, was sent to the founding hospital and baptized Pasqualino. Removed to Rome and acknowledged in 1513, the child received an excellent education; and under the munificent patronage of the Medici became Cardinal Ippolito."

Titian, of course, painted his portrait. Mrs. Beach over four hundred years later deals with his life in a book to me both moving and absorbing. Her narrative purports to be written by the Pacifica, or whoever she was, who bore the future Cardinal. A name is never revealed. The narrative runs through the rule of three Popes and has for various backgrounds Urbino, Rome, Florence, Le Selve, Pagliano, Fondi, Itri, and Urbino again. Examine the notes to this book and you will see the extent of the author's documentation. Yet there is a fine combination of scholarship and auctorial skill. All the intrigue of the time covers the book like a network, and such personages as Castiglione and Cardinal Bembo loom in the figured tapestry. I have no stricture to make upon the recreated atmosphere of the period. Apparently fact is as little distorted as possible. There is distinction of style too. This is far from being an ordinary run-of-the-mine historical novel.

The young Ippolito died at the age of twenty-five. One forgets how young the great of that period were! His love for Giulia Gonzaga, and their thwarted romance, are beautifully related. He himself, running true to form, left a bastard son of his own. Though a minor figure among the Medici, Cardinal Ippolito is nevertheless a brilliant figure, and he has found a fictional biographer to do him justice in a fine and full-bodied book.



SCENE AT A REHEARSAL OF "THE FALL OF THE CITY"

Disraeli