

# Footprints on the Sands

YOUNG LONGFELLOW (1807-1843). By Lawrance Thompson. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1938. \$4.50.

Reviewed by F. O. MATTHIESSEN

THE Longfellow whom we see here is more human than we have been accustomed to consider him. Since his image was cast in plaster by his pious brother, no one until Lawrance Thompson has gone through all the source materials in an attempt to make a full-length portrait closer to the original. A dozen years ago Herbert Gorman satisfied the Stracheyan distaste for the poet's whole era by calling his subject "A Victorian American," and by virtually draping the bust with one of the Queen's



From a painting by C. G. Thompson  
Longfellow at thirty-three

shawls. But the figure who now emerges through the passages in letters and journals which were so carefully excised by Samuel Longfellow is not frozen into an attitude of docile correctness. He was impressionable, impetuous, and frequently torn by uncertainty and conflict.

When, following his graduation from Bowdoin, he was sent to Europe at nineteen in order to master foreign languages, he seems instead to have spent most of three years in a boyish diletantism, using "Childe Harold" for a guide-book, and bringing back, as he confessed, "dreamy sensations and vague recollections of a sunny land." Established as a teacher at Brunswick, he felt himself being starved "in this land of Barbarians—this miserable Down East." Later at Cambridge he was no less restless and dissatisfied with the routine that seemed to be vitiating his own work. But his real inner tumult was during the winter of suffering after his first wife's death in 1835, and increasingly during the half-dozen years of his unsuccessful courtship of Frances Appleton, when he was men-

tally and nervously racked almost to the point of collapse. With the resolution of this period of unhappiness in her final acceptance, Thompson's competent narrative reaches its climax and conclusion.

Such findings may not be of enough interest to carry many readers through a whole volume which deliberately relegates any analysis of the poet's work to a later critical bibliography. Certainly the brief essays in revaluation by Howard Jones in 1931 and Odell Shepard in 1934 brought us closer to Longfellow's essential life, the life of his poems. But by confining his attention to the formative years of his subject's career, Thompson has thrown into sharper relief the forces which launched it. He reprints significant passages from a heretofore neglected defense of poetry which Longfellow wrote at twenty-four, significant because half a dozen years before Emerson's "American Scholar" Longfellow was making some of the same pleas for an original and self-reliant literature. But in spite of his urging his fellow poets to follow Sidney's maxim, Longfellow himself seems to have had practically nothing to say during the whole decade of his twenties, the very time when one might have expected a romantic poet to be most prolific.

It was only when his own need for concentrated purpose to release him from despair coincided with his impression of "Wilhelm Meister" that he broke out with a voice of his own in "A Psalm of Life" in 1838. But one could never be sure what Longfellow would find when he looked in his heart to write. Thompson has shown that the novel "Hyperion" is based more directly on the poet's experience than anything else he ever did. Yet, glancing at the book today without that knowledge, one would never suspect its mild pages to be anything other than a blend of Richter's fanciful style with Goethe's philosophy of action. The Longfellow who is more nearly readable is the one who shares in his generation's feeling for native themes, who, while in Dresden in 1829, is already turning his "untravelling heart" to the plan for a "Sketch Book" of New England life, who, near the end of the period with which Thompson deals, has at last made a start with a ballad about the wreck of a schooner "in the great storm a fortnight ago . . . I think I shall write more. The *National Ballad* is a virgin soil here in New England; and there are great materials. Besides I have a great notion of *working upon people's feelings*." That was the Longfellow whose poems were judged by the standards of his contemporaries to be "all one could wish them to be . . . simple, graceful, strong; without any taint of coarseness, harshness, or passion." The only word one could remove from that description is "strong."

a nickel of it. Salter's estimate of Sol is that of a sympathetic, intimate friend, and I found that I agreed with him because Levitan was certainly an amazing Jew, as Salter presents him, a man who made a fortune and worshipped Bob LaFollette. Another friendly biography is that of LaGuardia by Paul Kern, the mayor's law secretary.

The only woman politician included is Anna Brancato, representative from Philadelphia to the Pennsylvania State Legislature. Judging by the success she has had a good deal may be heard from her, but she failed to impress me. She was a bit too coy with Frances L. Reinhold, her biographer, and I couldn't get excited about the "handsome engagement ring" that glistened on the lady legislator's finger. I got the impression that she was successful in the legislature because she was a woman and not because she is a good politician.

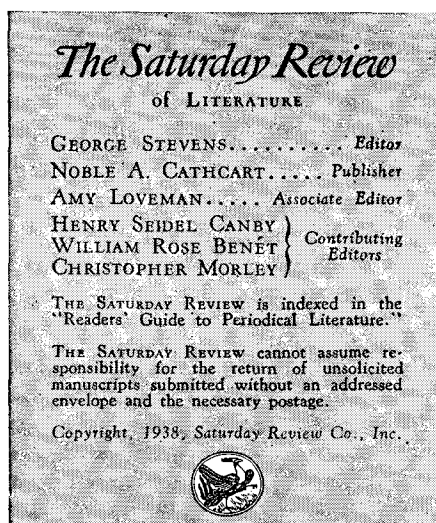
Salter's second contribution, "Honest Tom McIntyre, an Old-Style Politician," left me confused. He has used fictitious names and election districts in presenting Honest Tom against the background of Philadelphia politics, and I have no doubt that the Philadelphian who is in the know, the reader who can spot and identify the characters in it, will get quite a sting out of it. There may be some revelations there which escape me for that reason.

The critical biographies are all very good. I came away with the idea that Vandenberg is pretty much of a Frank Merriwell; George Norris got my complete admiration; I found it hard to reconcile Robert F. Wagner and Tammany. John L. Lewis and Big Jim Farley measured up, but so much has been printed about them lately that my interest was dulled. On the other hand, I could have read more about Norman Thomas in the same vein.

Lindsay Hoben's story of Dan Hoan, Mayor of Milwaukee, left me shaking my head. Milwaukee is so well advertised as an honest city with an efficient government that the Hoan who went to bat for strikers and for civil rights surprised me in his private life and his enthusiasm for quack medical remedies. Sickler of Salem County, New Jersey, is a good study of the county politician and apostle of Jim Farley, and Robert Heuck of Hamilton County, Ohio, properly had a place in the collection, but he did not arouse me.

Among this collection are the men who will one day be running the country, and in the background are the old-timers about to walk off the stage. The political commentator will read it and put it in his library for future reference. For the political student it is a "must."

Joseph F. Dinneen, on the staff of the Boston Globe, has contributed articles on politicians to leading magazines, and is the author of "Ward Eight," a novel of politics in Boston.



## Diagnosis of the Modern Temper

PAUL VALÉRY has been quoted as saying that he gets no great satisfaction out of writing; that the act of composition is merely the drudgery of putting on paper what he has already had the pleasure of constructing in his mind. Whether M. Valéry ever said words to that effect, and if he did, whether he meant them, we do not know. But it ought to be true, because of all contemporary men of letters, it would be difficult to find one who writes less and says more. His new book, "Variety: Second Series," is a selection of eight essays from three small volumes which he has published in France within the last decade, and it is the first book by M. Valéry to appear in this country since his "Variety," in 1927.

"Variety: Second Series" was reviewed in this magazine two weeks ago. Since it is a book of essays by an author whose name is known to a comparatively small public in this country, it may escape the attention of numerous readers who might find it one of the most stimulating books of the year. Its contents, moreover, are provocative of ideas for inexhaustible discussion. For these reasons we propose to add to the review which we published a few footnotes of further comment.

The essence of the book, as Henry Seidel Canby pointed out in his review, is in the two closing essays, on "Spiritual Polity" and "The Balance Sheet of the Intelligence." M. Valéry has a habit, encouraged no doubt by the character of the French language, in which verbosity and obscurity are more difficult to achieve than in English, of setting down entirely novel ideas, from which the most startling conclusions may emerge, as if they were obvious and familiar maxims taken for granted by everybody. This is especially true in his concluding essay, which is a discussion of the nature of progress and of its effects on the contemporary world. M. Valéry is telling us that our age is different, in degree and in kind, from any that has preceded it. He says this in

the tone of voice which he would use for saying that there is nothing new under the sun; and only after a moment's reflection do we realize that he is not repeating, but reversing, that familiar platitude.

In a few decades, we have overturned and created so many things at the expense of the past—refuting, disorganizing, reorganizing the ideas, the methods, the institutions which it has bequeathed us—that the present appears to us an entirely unprecedented state. We no longer regard the past as a son regards his father, as a source from whom he can learn something, but as a grown man regards a child. . . .

In a word, we have the privilege—or interesting misfortune—of seeing a profound, rapid, irresistible transformation of all the conditions of human action.

Do not for a moment believe that men born before our time ever witnessed variations so great and so extraordinary.

The possibly debatable nature of some of these assertions (to which quotation out of context does considerable injustice), as of M. Valéry's central point, is one for philosophers and historians. For the general reader, the important part of the discussion is in its application and its by-products. M. Valéry analyzes a civilization which invented speed and then used it to proceed rapidly into chaos, the extent of which has become apparent only in the present decade.

It is noteworthy that literary experiments in chaos—that is, in formlessness—anticipated by a number of years M. Valéry's diagnosis of civilization. Examples need not be multiplied: Gertrude Stein began writing nonsense syllables many years ago; James Joyce brought the amorphous stream of consciousness to its ultimate conclusion in 1921, beyond which there was nothing to explore but the stream of unconsciousness. Experimentalism in literature, with all the little

magazines dedicated to the expression of chaos, flourished in the twenties, when civilization seemed secure and the world safe for democracy. In the thirties, these things have found no audience, if indeed they have been produced at all. Most of the enthusiasts for "Ulysses," although some of us still look upon it as one of the landmarks of the century, have pretty well forgotten that Joyce's "Work in Progress" is still in progress. Gertrude Stein found an audience a few years ago when she finally produced a book—her autobiography—in more or less comprehensible English. (It is true that her "Four Saints in Three Acts" was taken to the bosom of the literary equivalent of café society in 1934, but this is beside the point: "Four Saints" enjoyed a brief public vogue, following long after the author's more exclusively literary vogue; besides, it was set to music, which, incidentally, was melodious, easy, and comprehensible.)

We suggested a few weeks ago on this page that a salient characteristic of this decade's literary production is the effort to catch up with the past, exemplified by the historical novelists in America and the panoramic chroniclers, like Romaine and Du Gard, in France. Why this should be the preoccupation of a world thoroughly unsure of itself—as chaos and experiment marked the writing of the preceding, confident decade—we leave to better minds to figure out: to M. Valéry, for example. It is one of innumerable trains of thought set in motion by his extremely interesting book. His own literary essays in this volume concern figures of the past century—notably Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Stendhal. We should trade any ten books of the present year for a chance to learn what M. Valéry thinks of current literature in relation to the world which he has so brilliantly diagnosed.

## Lazarus Questioned

(From "I Lazarus")

BY LLOYD FRANKENBERG

IT was the voices. There were voices  
about me, rippling, washing, subsiding.

What was it they were asking?—Were you dead?

(Dead? dead? it was surely as if

I had not been alive)—I do not remember, I said.—

Did you wake at the sound of your name?

or not till the words, Come forth?—

Did you see God?—Is the devil's forehead  
cleft?

Man is not curious really.

The wonder in their eyes dies out.

They go to seek assurance in  
the words of one who stands apart  
and speaks from clearer memory  
or from no memory at all  
but clearly:—"In my Father's house. . ."