

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 Romain Rolland 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, splashing, 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. . ."

Letters to the Editor: *Pearl Buck and the Nobel Prize; Photographs vs. Drawings*

Mark Twain Papers

SIR:—In connection with my article on the Mark Twain papers, I should like to repeat what I said in your correspondence columns some months ago: that I cannot answer questions about the content of the papers. In spite of the notification which you published some twenty collectors, teachers of literature, and graduate students have written to me, sometimes pleading for information, sometimes demanding it. There are two reasons why I must refuse all such requests. In the first place it is formally impossible: the terms of the agreement under which I am working forbid me to give out any information until the books I am preparing for publication are ready. In the second place it is physically impossible: until the job of arranging the papers is finished, to answer the most casual and innocent-appearing question might require many hours of work—and, besides editing the Mark Twain papers, I am writing a book of my own.

BERNARD DeVOTO.

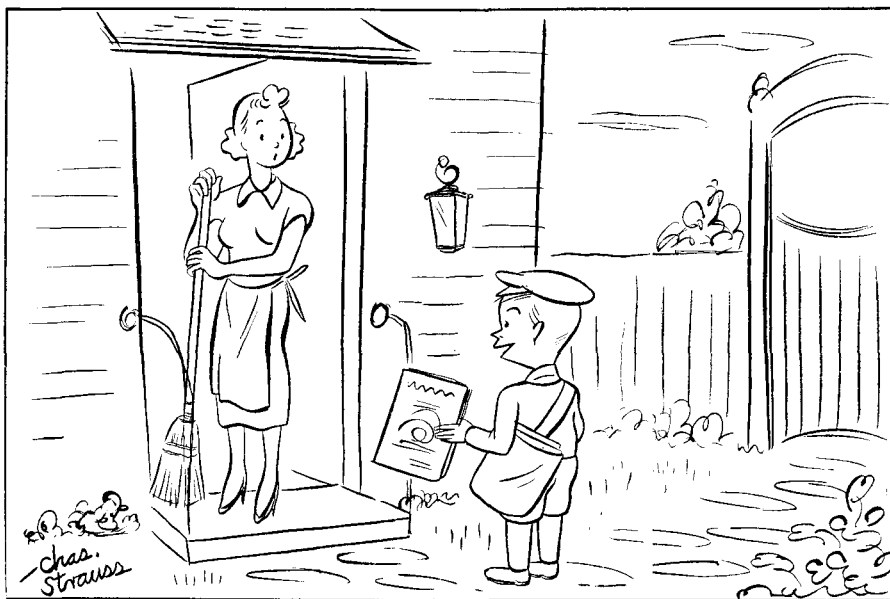
Cambridge, Mass.

The Nobel Prize

SIR:—I have read with much interest Mr. Canby's very fair appraisal of the work of the Nobel Prize Committee in awarding the recent prize for literature to Pearl Buck, but I cannot help thinking that Mr. Canby has gone out of his way to be just, and that perhaps he himself feels that he has. It is all very well to say that the Committee is not susceptible to the influence of pressure groups and that it likes to make up its own mind, but there is no logic in drawing the conclusion from such statements that unsusceptibility and independence necessarily result in justice.

Mistakes in awarding the prize have been made before, and perhaps inevitably, but when the work of Americans is selected for examination the Committee seems particularly prone to err. That "The Good Earth" is a fine novel no sensible person will deny, but if the Nobel Prize is to have any meaning at all there must be a certain minimum of flexibility and eccentricity in the standards set up for judging.

Perhaps the prize should not have come to an American at all this year—I am not sufficiently acquainted with contemporary literature to be qualified to venture an opinion—but if the judges in their wisdom thought it should come here, and to a woman, there is no denying that the claims of Willa Cather were superior to those of Pearl Buck, and, in fact, superior to those of any other American woman now writing. That her books possess the idealistic tendency so highly thought of by Alfred Nobel it would be foolish to deny. She may not be so great as some of her admirers think, but she has illuminated a corner of American life, and while she may represent no special school of literature she has been capable of writing books perhaps as fine as any produced in the United States in this century.



"Madam, if I can get enough far-sighted mothers to subscribe to the *Woman's Home Companion* now, I won't have to work while I'm in college."

Among the men Theodore Dreiser was the logical choice, and it is greatly to Mrs. Buck's credit that after she had accepted the prize she stated that in her opinion it might more properly have gone to him.

LOUISE DAVIES.

Ventura, Cal.

The Maryland Yellowthroat

SIR:—I am concerned with what Miss Skinner's "Dithers and Jitters" has done to Mr. Lockridge. Imagine all bird songs to the tune of "bitch-it-up, bitch-it-up, bitch-it-up." I surmise that Miss Skinner knows her birds, but alas for Mr. Lockridge. Henceforth all birds will sing to him in a rhythm fit for the Jitter-bugs.

In Kansas, Miss Skinner's little bird calls "Witch-a-ta, witch-a-ta, witch-a-ta." I've always been suspicious of him for he comes from Maryland and wears a mask. Now, thanks to Miss Skinner, his mask is off. Next spring when the Maryland Yellowthroat returns to my garden wall, I'll have a better understanding.

C. C. YOUNG.

Lansing, Mich.

Chamberlain and Steffens

SIR:—Chamberlain's comments on Steffens's Letters, November 12, were interesting and expose his point of view, which is most practical in this compromising world. I think I perceive, however, that J. C. does not quite grasp Steffens's economic outlook.

Steffens was social-minded: he saw social values, especially economic values that are clearly social. He told us in his biography that it was these social values which caused the conflicts among politicians for control of governments. He repeated often that the rewards for graft were so great that no man could withstand them. He concluded, logically, that society as a whole should absorb social

values and not leave them loosely about for individuals to quarrel over and appropriate.

As I understand J. C., he would have a "broker" divide the social values among individual claimants. I think then, J. C. falls just short of being social-minded. I know he is liberal-minded and democratic-minded. But without the advantages of the social-minded viewpoint one can hardly interpret a Steffens.

W. R. EDWARDS.

Chula Vista, Cal.

Snapshots

SIR:—I take exception to a remark by Allan Nevins in his review of "Adventures of America" in your issue of November 26th.

He says that a good painting or drawing is nearly always preferable to a snapshot. Does he know what a snapshot is? To a photographer the word means a photograph made with an exposure of 1/25th of a second or less. Did he mean to imply that a snapshot is inferior in technique?

The pictures in the book under review were made at a time when very few "snapshots" were possible. These pictures were not in competition with snapshots. But nowadays when photographs of news events can be made at snapshot speed we have weekly magazines of photographs instead of weeklies like *Harper's* made up of drawings.

The photographs made by Brady remind us that there were better photographs of Civil War scenes unpublished than the drawings that were published in *Harper's Weekly*.

What your reviewer evidently means is that he prefers drawings and paintings to photographs. All I can say is, "God help him!"

ARTHUR W. COURTNEY.

New York City.