

Explosives in Books

A Danish Point of View

BY FREDERIK SCHYBERG

DON TRACY is the fifth of the young, hard-boiled writers who crowded into the wake of Ernest Hemingway, and with whom he now has to compete. Horace McCoy, James M. Cain, John O'Hara, and John Steinbeck are the four others. They tell a story well, but they resemble each other, and their chief characters are all alike. Their writings are a noteworthy supplement to that "Truth about America," half of which the film companies have been telling us during recent years. The censor has cut out the rest, and this part is the truth with which the hard-boiled authors now desire to acquaint us.

But how one-sided books must appear in which are only to be found all those things which a censor automatically would omit in a film! Whoredom, drink, murder, bad language, rape, lynching, and accidents sadistically reported. The poetic formula, if such a thing can be established, in these books derives from Hemingway's "Farewell to Arms."

In two disillusioned, modern children of reality, who feel that nothing primitive, nothing of the human animal, is alien to them, the suspicion is aroused that perhaps the soul too might have its charm, that perhaps a nobler reality might exist than the reality which manifests itself in liquor and girls. But at that very moment the catastrophe arrives. Life's giant steamroller is on top of them and flattens them out. It was not to be. Modern reality does not permit it.

The best expression of the genre is "The Postman Always Rings Twice," by James M. Cain. The close connection—though by way of passionate protest,—that these authors have with Hollywood's present efforts may be seen in the fact that it is precisely there that the two latest hard-boiled novels are laid: Horace McCoy's and O'Hara's. They are not yet translated into Danish but probably will be. For the time being we have Don Tracy's "Round Trip," which fits into the formula nicely—but is an excellent piece of work, just the same.

The hero of "Round Trip" is a press

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 249)

ARCHIBALD MacLEISH:
AMERICAN LETTER

America is neither a land nor a
people;
A word's shape it is, a wind's
sweep—

Many of one mouth, of one breath,
Only a taught speech and an aped
tongue.

America is alone and the gulls
calling.

It is a strange thing to be an
American.

photographer, but otherwise the usual primitive—a great brawler, pornographer, drunkard, and gambler. Then he meets Edith, a sweet young girl, who has just escaped from Charlie, the horrid sadist. After a murder and acquittal, the photographer marries Edith, and they have a child, a lovely boy, who is referred to as "the little fellow." A motor accident finishes Edith and the little fellow. And what is left then? The press photographer returns to his former life, a hopeless, despairing man, but a brawler, pornographer, drunkard, and gambler. The narrative is vivid, concise, and excellent. Much is said, we may safely admit, but even more is hinted at. The hard-boiled books are also a reaction against the detailed massiveness of the novels of the past generation. Here we get the truth about life, expressed in a clenched fist and a black eye.

Splendid, as good as a film, is the court scene where the photographer is acquitted. Most excellent the scene where he is waiting for his child in the hospital—big strong man collapsing like a wet napkin. Highly picturesque the entire scenery of an American newspaper office, and brief and effective the lightning glimpse of a lynching.

It is a book to read, but beware of the genre. It is dangerous. These liberated writers are mixing explosives the effect of which they perhaps hardly realize. They are describing a generation which has nothing to live for, but which, though maybe only in a negative sense, suffers from a lack of meaning in its life, an idea! Let an American Hitler arise, and all the male characters in the novels of these five will rush to his standard. These books are really about unemployed *condottiere*, foolhardy hirelings, who have no one to take hire with and therefore become the servants of their own instincts. One great demagogue, and these indignant democrats would be changed before our very eyes into howling Nazis. Consider: without exception you will find at the core of each of these books a blind intolerance lurking; a bitter narrowmindedness, a blood-and-soil complex that has taken root, and a wholly desperate breaking away from the reality of civilization.

It has been the fashion for some time to admire primitive man. In Europe we are now watching the consequences. These young hard-boiled American writers are manufacturing artillery which may some day hit their readers on both sides of the Atlantic all too realistically. They and we can then afterwards live on as best we may, unable to run away from the "truths" which we have ourselves accepted.

Dr. Frederik Schyberg is the leading literary and dramatic critic on the Danish newspaper Politiken.

The AMEN CORNER

"The twelfth day of Christmas,
My true love gave me
Twelve lords a leaping,
Eleven ladies dancing,
Ten pipers piping,
Nine drummers drumming,
Eight maids a milking,
Seven swans a swimming,
Six geese a laying,
Five gold rings,
Four colly birds,
Three French hens,
Two turtle doves, and
A partridge in a pear-tree." Anon.

Variety is the key-note of that most unusual anthology, *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, chosen by W. H. Auden,¹ which is one of the many enticements the Oxford University Press² has provided at this festive season. Mr. Auden explains in his Introduction the very original definition of light verse which results in a selection ranging from Chaucer to D. H. Lawrence, and including Swift and Vachel Lindsay, Byron and Siegfried Sassoon, as well as the authors one expects to meet—Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, W. S. Gilbert, Hilaire Belloc, G. K. Chesterton, et al. The Anonymous gems vary from "Green Grow the Rushes O" to "Casey Jones" and "Frankie and Johnny." And Mr. Auden is not above a limerick.

W. H. Auden is the most important poet writing today, in the opinion of Louis Macneice. In *Modern Poetry*,³ only just published by the Oxford Press, he analyses his own reactions to poetry from childhood, and then the work of particular poets—Housman, Yeats, Hopkins, Auden, Spender. It is one of the most stimulating, illuminating, and hopeful books the Oxonian has lately read. If you are at all interested in poetry or in the first stirrings of new intellectual developments, don't miss it.

And we also recommend *The Dynasts and the Post-War Age in Poetry*, by A. C. Chakravarty,⁴ published on the same day. It is a first-rate piece of literary criticism, with the widest implications. It is really, as the sub-title says, "A Study in Modern Ideas," and gives the background for Mr. Macneice's *Modern Poetry*.

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Variety is a good key-note; so we will take time to recommend the most delightful of travel books, *To Persia for Flowers* by Alice Fullerton,⁵ and the newest Phaidon Art Book,⁶ *El Greco*, before we wish you a Happy New Year!

THE OXONIAN.

(¹) \$3.00. (²) 114 Fifth Avenue. (³) \$3.00.
(⁴) \$2.75. (⁵) \$3.00. (⁶) Write for complete list.
(⁷) \$3.00.

The New Books

Art

EL GRECO'S PAINTINGS. Phaidon Edition. Oxford University Press. 1938. \$3.

This volume, substantially bound in buckram and provided with compact and accurate introductory matter, is a real boon to the many admirers of El Greco's art who have slender bank accounts. Two hundred and thirty-two photographic plates of generous scale reproduce admirably the more important pictures, and give scores of speaking details. Thirteen color plates are of poor and misleading effect. The present writer would willingly trade them for as many monochrome reproductions. The pictures are of course located as they were before the Civil War. It is merely a fond hope that they will ever return to their proper museums and churches.

F. J. M.

BAUHAUS 1919-1928. Edited by Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, and Ise Gropius. Museum of Modern Art. 1938. \$3.75.

Alfred Barr, in his admirable introduction to the latest publication of the Museum of Modern Art, writes: "This book is primarily a collection of evidence . . . assembled here with a minimum of retrospective revision." In this case, however, retrospective revision was essential and the lack of it does not constitute a virtue. The book suffers from a plethora of heterogeneous illustrations; it becomes an annotated scrapbook. The typography and the layout of the annotations do not assist in the act of reading when searching for a simplification of material for analysis. One does not ask for an academizing or wish to retard experiment, but it would have been well for the designer to have reviewed the publications of the Bauhaus Press, with which he was very familiar, or of the earlier "Stijl" group.

In the light of the importance of the Bauhaus of Weimar and Dessau to the world of modern design in the fine and applied arts, it is to be regretted that a clearer exposition of its aims, and the results of these first ten out of fourteen years of vital experiment is not presented.

C. F.

Belles Lettres

FOUR LECTURES. By Anthony Trollope. Edited with Collations, Notes, Etc., by Morris L. Parrish. 150 copies. London: Constable & Co. 1938.

"I do not believe that the leading men of the North any longer look for a reconstitution of the old Union. For myself I regard it as impossible that senators from Georgia and Massachusetts should ever again sit in the same assembly."

Thus Anthony Trollope a few months before Gettysburg in the lecture in this little volume to which the cisatlantic eye inevitably turns first—"The Present Condition of the Northern States of the American Union." Then, skipping (at least for the moment) "The Civil Service as a Profession" and "Higher Education

for Women," one perforce pauses at the essay "On English Prose Fiction as a Rational Amusement," where the author is on firmer ground than when functioning as a Victorian Walter Lippmann. (Let it be noted, however, that apart from its wrong guessing the American paper is engrossing.) The discussion of fiction is particularly significant for its laudation of Scott and for its failure to mention Dickens.

These four lectures have previously been preserved only in the form of pamphlets printed for Trollope's own use. Mr. Parrish's diligence has rescued them and given them permanent dress—moreover, by acquiring Trollope's own copies of the lectures, he has been able to list the author's corrections and alterations. At the risk of precipitating a coup d'état at the hands of A. Edward Newton and Carroll A. Wilson, Mr. Parrish may be satisfactorily identified as the king of American Trollopeans.

J. T. W.

THE SELECTED WORKS OF BEN JONSON. Edited by Harry Levin. Random House. 1938. \$3.50.

Jonson's plays read well. To this purpose the present edition serves excellently. Unwilling to wait for the great scholarly edition of Herford and Simpson, the editors of Random House and None-such have produced a handsome volume of Jonson, unencumbered by scholarly apparatus. Here are the tragedy of "Sejanus" and the comedies of "Volpone," "Epicene," "The Alchemist," "Every Man in His Humour," and "Bartholomew Fair"; three of Jonson's twenty-two masques are printed, and there is a fair selection from his lyric verse and his criticism. A special delight are the selections from "Timber," and the racy bits recorded by Ben's malicious Boswell, Drummond. The introduction by Harry Levin ranges from the apologetic to the illuminating, but never warms to affection or gusto.

R. S.

Fiction

MARRIAGE IS SO FINAL. By Winifred Halsted. Kinsey. 1939. \$2.

This first novel is an attempt to recreate a vanished atmosphere of more than Pompeian splendor, complexity, and holowness—the life of a great New York bank in 1932. The heroine, Miranda, for whom the author has a fondness so great as to suggest an autobiography, scoffs at the demi-gods of the bank, but is nevertheless impressed. The closing of the bank, the investigation of the officers, leave her open-eyed, wide-eyed no longer.

In her private life, too, Miranda achieves independence of judgment. Two men want to marry her: Vermont Adam, a Cal Coolidge without even his legend, and Philadelphia Barton, a Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., with Thoreau in his pocket to counsel radicalism. Society approves the hard-working and sententious Adam; society disapproves of the gay and cynical Barton. When the pillars of society crash, Miranda chooses Barton.

Miss Halsted writes intelligently and amusingly. Everyone has known her characters; everyone will recognize that many of her situations and comments are funny. But the characters never take over the book; Miss Halsted's smiling face is always to be seen, as she jerks their strings.

K. S.

JILL FELL DOWN. By Jerrard Tickell. Morrow. 1939. \$2.

The romantic revival takes a new quirk in "Jill Fell Down" and we have the lovely heroine pursued not by the city slicker but by the power of the press to blast reputations. Jill asked a couple of men one night for a light for her cigarette, and woke up the next morning to find that she had ceased to be glorified as the Brenda Frazier of the London season and had become the center of an extensive and highly unpleasant raised eyebrows campaign.

Jerrard Tickell's use of plot is ingenious, and he has contrived real suspense and some authentic characters. The book is no masterpiece, but it does move along at a good pace and is definitely not dull. A lot of nice amusing people get in a jam and manage to seem real enough so that you are sorry, alive enough so that you do care for the space of time during which you are reading the book what happens to them. "Jill Fell Down" is a perfect substitute for a magazine during that inevitable afternoon when you really do have to stay in bed and see if you can get rid of your cold.

F. W.

International

BEFORE AMERICA DECIDES: FORESIGHT IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS. Edited by Frank P. Davidson and George S. Viereck, Jr. Harvard University Press. 1938. \$3.

Since sweetness and light were reestablished in Europe as a result of the Munich agreement, public debate on American foreign policy has grown hotter, fiercer, and more confused than ever. In the maelstrom of conflicting ideas, the editors of "Before America Decides"—a collection of essays on the United States and the world crisis—offer no pat solutions. But they do present data and arguments which will aid the reader himself to make a rational choice among designated alternatives. And as President Lowell points out in a trenchant foreword, foreign policy, like war policies, should be rationally plotted and planned, preferably by experts who will take into account all possible contingencies. Study and selection, rather than emotional bias or physical constraint, should constitute the determining factor in our decisions.

Hans Kohn places the problem as a whole in its proper setting by a discussion of contemporary nationalism, which he is tempted to regard as an obsolescent phenomenon in the interdependent world of today. Dean Phelps traces European political alignments since the war and notes the growing American tendency to depict a black-and-white division of the world into dictatorships and democracies. Viewing the Far Eastern scene, Arthur