

Melville and His Sources

MELVILLE IN THE SOUTH SEAS.

By Charles Roberts Anderson. New York: Columbia University Press. 1939. 522 pp. \$4.50.

Reviewed by ODELL SHEPARD

associated readers know exactly who it is I mean)—so fine about the drinks and yet falling into another fault that always exasperates us—filling his books with description and scenery. He begins, practically always, with a “Market Town,”—Hellborough, or some such place where they talk broad something; we can stand it for a street or two, but when it comes to the Town Hall, dating from Edward the Confessor, we pass. Scenery we don’t need at all, except to take it fast, like a tourist in a picture gallery. You see, those of us who have read crime stories for twenty or thirty years, have got in our minds a collection of scenes like what they call the “sets” in a twenty-three, theater. “Market Town of Hellborough!”—We have it; “Purlieus of Chicago,”—right, here you are; “Drawing room of the rectory,”—that’s it,—or not, not that, that “Bar Room in Denver,”—but anyway we’ve got all our “sets.” And a collection of weather,—it’s odd the junk we carry in our minds, as an equipment for reading.

And there’s this,—as you get near the end of the story, don’t have them all chase one another round. I mean all the characters, bandits, detectives, etc.,—in a sort of grand climax. You know the kind of thing I mean—in and out of cellars, down rat holes, out through outhouses: poor old Edgar Wallace,—there, I hadn’t meant to mention names, but never mind—could never get away from this; the sleuth trapped by the bandit, thrown into a cellar, water turned on, reaches his throat, dives out through a sewer, runs round in front, nails up the door, bandit trapped, goes to the attic, detective follows, detective trapped, bandit on roof, leaps into an aeroplane, detective crawls through a fly-screen, leaps into another aeroplane,—zoop! They’re both gone. We have to begin over again.

And here’s a point of importance for the conclusion itself. Don’t be afraid to hang the criminal at the end; better lay the story, if you can, in a jurisdiction where they hang them because, to us, the readers, the electric chair sounds too uncomfortable. But hanging is old and respectable, and if you like you can use such a phrase as “went to the gallows,” or “went to the scaffold,”—that’s as simple as Old Mother Hubbard. But I mean we want him *hanged*; don’t let him fall into the sea out of his aeroplane. It’s not good enough. Hold him tight by the pants till you get him to the gallows. And *don’t* let your criminal get ill in prison, or get so badly wounded, or so heavily poisoned that he never gets tried, because he is “summoned before a Higher Court.”—Honestly, you can’t get a higher criminal court than the State Court of Appeal. There isn’t one.

I’ll stop there. Other readers may have suggestions.

IN order to be fair to this valuable book one must keep in mind its limitations of theme, purpose, and method. More moderate in tone than Lewis Mumford’s study of Melville, less a work of literary criticism than John Freeman’s, and much less extensive in scope, as its title indicates, than Raymond Weaver’s, it is mainly concerned, the author says, “with an analysis of Melville’s technique of composition” — or, as the present reviewer would prefer to say, with gathering the materials upon which that technique acted.

Professor Anderson shows himself in this book as a cool, industrious, highly



Herman Melville

skillful fact-finder. Confining his researches chiefly to the four years at sea which, though certainly the most important years of Melville’s life, have hitherto been the least known, he finds an amazing quantity of facts, many of which are really pertinent to our understanding of a strange and enigmatic figure. His findings enable us to distinguish, for the first time, between those materials of “Typee,” “Omoo,” and “White Jacket” which were derived from personal experience and those that were drawn from Melville’s reading. Other books may serve better than this one the needs of those who want a general introduction to Melville’s mind and art, but no other book has added in a comparable degree to the little that we know about the man’s life and the raw materials of his writing.

In describing the way in which rope-

yarn is made by sailors, Melville says in his “Redburn” that “for materials they use odds and ends of old rigging called *junk*, the yarns of which are picked to pieces and then twisted into new combinations.” This, he adds, is something like the way in which “most books are manufactured.” And it is Professor Anderson’s opinion that Melville’s own books, or at any rate those that he wrote about the South Seas, were manufactured in much this way. For this opinion he advances a large amount of evidence, nearly all of which is entirely new. In accordance with the evidence he sets forth the books of Melville “less as masterpieces of creative imagination than as deliberately manufactured records . . . partly borrowed from the writings of other voyagers, partly fictionized autobiography, embellished and pointed for the sake of propaganda.”

Although the tone of disparagement discernible in these words does not pervade his book, Professor Anderson brings before us a less imposing Melville than the one presented by other recent commentators. One reason for this may be that he knows much more about what the man Herman Melville did, what he read, and where he went—at least during the South Seas quadrennium—than others have known. Besides that, however, it is a secondary purpose of his study to strip Melville and his books of their “romantic trappings” and to bring before us not so much “America’s mid-Victorian Jeremiah” as “the literary discoverer of the South Seas.” In a sense, he is defending the young and eager Melville of the 1840s against the bearded Carlylean transcendentalist that he later became. More precisely speaking, he defends the facts of Melville’s life and work against what he takes to be the fiction.

Like George Borrow, Herman Melville is hard to classify. Scarcely a novelist, not quite an autobiographer, and certainly not a veracious narrator of travels, he escapes the more obvious categories—unless, to be sure, one sets him down once for all as a liar. And even when one has come to the end of Professor Anderson’s extremely able, learned, and heavily documented book, he remains a man of mystery. After one has been shown repeatedly that he had a “penchant for working from literary sources in preference even to his own observations” — and this is one trait, at least, which he had in common with Shakespeare—there is still the question of his unquestionable genius.

Concerning this genius and its precise nature Professor Anderson has little to say, probably because the dis-

cussion of it is not his present business. He is as well aware as any of his readers can be that the tributaries of fact flowing down into Melville's imagination are important to us only because everything that came there suffered a sea-change. He does not know the method of that transformation, and so he does not really provide us with "an analysis of Melville's technique of composition"; but he does know that the transformation took place. He belongs, however, to that serviceable and timely school of contemporary scholarship which tries to get its facts right, and to get them in sufficient amount, before generalizing upon them. He is one of the members of this school who know that there are two ways, one of them scornful but the other patient and open-minded, in which we may ask the question, "What porridge had John Keats?"

Trouble from the Moon

THE HOPKINS MANUSCRIPT. By R. C. Sherriff. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1939. 352 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

MR. Sherriff's contribution to the eschatological literature so popular of late among English writers is that of a good novelist who has not sufficiently realized that apocalypse is a specialized subdivision of fiction, with its own special exigencies. When you tell of the collapse of civilization you must either write a first-rate news story, or show it through some character sympathetic to the reader. Mr. Sherriff prefers to let us have it as seen by an elderly bachelor, fussy, self-centered, and complacent, whose concern is less in the destruction of England than in the incidental destruction of his prize hens. The method has its ironic values, but it gives away more than it gains.

Little can be said about the story without destroying the skillfully built up suspense. Mr. Sherriff has been lavish (and original) enough to give us a succession of three catastrophes,

AGAINST AGGRESSION: Speeches by Maxim Litvinov, together with texts of treaties and of the Covenant of the League of Nations. New York: International Publishers. 1939. 208 pp. \$1.50.

Reviewed by VERA MICHELES DEAN

THIS collection of speeches by the former Soviet Foreign Commissar, accompanied by the texts of treaties of non-aggression and mutual assistance he had negotiated, cannot fail to be of interest at a moment when the future course of Soviet foreign policy is a matter of conjecture in the chancelleries of both democratic and totalitarian states. M. Litvinov's comments on international

affairs delivered during the period 1934-1938, mainly in Geneva and the U.S.S.R., make good reading on two counts—because of their unflinching realism and their pungent sense of humor. Whatever else may be said about Soviet leaders, they never shared the illusions of their Western colleagues regarding the ultimate aims of Hitler's "Mein Kampf." In 1935, when Germany rearmend in violation of the Versailles Treaty, Litvinov asked: "What is to be done if a country which demands or assumes the right to arm is exclusively led by people who have publicly announced as the program of their foreign policy a policy which consists, not only in revenge, but in the unrestricted conquest of foreign territory and the destruction of the independence of whole states?"—a question not raised by Mr. Chamberlain until after Hitler's occupation of Bohemia and Moravia.

To this question Litvinov answered by presenting a program of what might be described as preventive international medicine. His assumption was that the best way to check aggression was to convince the would-be aggressor that he would be met with overwhelming force. He scoffed at those who urged the creation of a universal League, contending that there could be no basis for collaboration between peace-minded countries (even though bourgeois) and treaty-breakers. He demanded that League obligations, far from being diluted, should be strengthened and made automatic. He declared again and again that peace is indivisible, that no bonuses in the form of concessions should be made to sword-rattling nations, that a solid front of collective security should be built on a foundation of regional pacts of mutual assistance. At the same time, he did not exclude the possibility of trade with the fascist powers, such as the Soviet Union, in spite of ideological differences, has successfully carried on with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Nor did he encourage the belief in Western countries that the Soviet Union was eager to join any blocs or combinations. Russia, he said in 1936, "will calmly let other states weigh and evaluate the advantages which can be derived for peace from close coöperation with the Soviet Union, and understand that the Soviet Union can give more than receive"—a formula which aptly describes the course of the Anglo-Soviet negotiations conducted by his successor, Premier Molotov.

While it would be difficult to doubt the sincerity of M. Litvinov's peace declarations, which express both the needs and desires of the U.S.S.R., his

the first of which involves the moon. As pure writing it is effectively handled, but his moon behaves like no moon known to contemporary science; if you are well read either in astronomy or in this kind of fiction, you will be unable to swallow that part of the story at all. Once past the lunar catastrophe he does better. The high-hearted unity with which the survivors get to the work of cleaning up and reconstruction is convincing to anyone who saw the same thing on a smaller scale after the New England hurricane, and so are the greedy nationalist rivalries over the exploitation of new and unexpected wealth which eventually put an end to reconstruction and bring on the later catastrophes. Here Sherriff's irony functions effectively again; as it does in the foreword by the Imperial Research Press of Addis Ababa, whose archeologists discover the manuscript a thousand years later. This sort of thing could be done very badly; Sherriff does it very well. It is a testimonial to his skill that you go on reading the book in spite of its defects.



R. C. Sherriff