

# Paring Off the Impurities

CHRONICLE OF DAWN. By Ramón Sender. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1944. 201 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RALPH BATES

ONE wet Sunday afternoon last spring I was present at an uncommonly pleasant cocktail party. Towards six o'clock the conversation in my part of the room, having gotten round to the American Labor Party, for a few minutes became as tedious as a crosstown trolley ride. It was suddenly broken by a sharp expletive in Aragonese Spanish, not the most likely of speeches in New York City.

"Thou, Aragonese, whence from?" I said to the small, hard-bodied speaker, with just enough derision to indicate a knowledge of Aragon.

"Thou, obesity, what knowest of Aragon?"

"The Three Sisters," naming a fabulous consort of peaks in the High Pyrenees of the Sobrarbe. "And the old Marquis Viu's palace-hotel at Torla, and those wild strawberry beds under Cotatuero's cliffs and I know how to move from the Enchanted Mountains, right to the Bisaurin, where even the streams get lost."

"That place of silence," he said. "My name is Ramón Sender."

So we worked our way into a corner and sat there, making one another contented and discontented with talk of peaks and passes and sheep pastures on those fantastic mountains, and of the famous battles of the defense of Madrid, in which we both took part. I have rarely heard talk that so naturally combined easiness and vehemence; subtlety and even profound intuitions with violent prejudice; fantasy so dressed in the tones of urbanity. Sender, as I listened, moved with a kind of boyish exuberance from one enormous theme to another, except that his grapple was that of a man in his ripeness. Or better, he talked exactly as one of those upland shepherds will sometimes talk when, after long months of solitude, a traveller passes his way.

Politics took up a deal of the time. It was a somewhat startling version of revolutionary faith he professed; austere and hispanic, of course, and because Spanish, intensely moral and not deliberately directed towards the achievement of mere material prosperity for Spain. Besides this, it seemed to me, there was some bizarre prejudice and not a little error in his thinking. Yet the salient thing was the purity, the cleanness of his thought. He spoke volubly of village feasts, and there was

a long, minutely reasoned essay on the reasons why a man cares to dwell so much on the scenes of his childhood. There was that trick (recorded in "A Man's Place," which he did not assume I had read) of hiding in the ribcage of a dead mule, in order to spring out upon and bell the stinking vultures. So that over his native town, that sleeps and stares in the sun like a skull on a desert altar, the birds of prey toll mournfully as they fly from



Ramón Sender

charnel yard to cliff. When he talked of girlhood, a theme which delighted him almost as much as boyhood, there was a cruel innocence in his thoughts. When he spoke of war, and of civil war, you felt the razor-like ferocity that lies beneath the lyricism of his writing. I cannot imagine any talk more improbable in this city, nor any product of a New York press less probable or more beautiful than this strange "Chronicle of Dawn."

So much of that memorable conversation is here, but digested and rigorously ordered by the narrative simplicity of the story. It is a simplicity which, at the story's full run, turns out to be no more simple than the Diabelli Variations. José Garcés, a Spanish Loyalist officer, is lying prisoner in a French concentration camp, shortly before the final destruction of the Spanish Republic. When he hears of its end his life-principle is destroyed, but before he dies he writes a book, this book, which is outwardly nothing but the story and course of his boyhood love for Valentina V. . . . Both lovers are ten years old and they live in that lost town of the Sobrarbe, in the heart of the vast desolation, where the vultures carry bells around their necks but the carrion crows do not.

(No need to worry, they have ropes around them.) It is a town in which the apothecary is still the man of science and a personage of note, in which the bishop's mistress wears starched and frilled petticoats of costly white material beneath her black rags, where a landowner still considers the Jesuits far too worldly and prefers the Benedictines, where for a dollar a goatherd will boil an old dead woman in a cauldron to provide a doctor with a skeleton. The story, however, is not a Spanish "Spoon River Anthology" of personality and anecdote, but a moving, integrated story with beginning, middle, and end. At the close José Garcés goes to a clerical college to be educated and presumably never sees Valentina again.

It is a simple scheme, yet presented with such force, such virtuosity of imaginative recall that one has the sense of hurrying over a strange and enormous landscape, in the company of haunted and prophetic children. Its memories, or its late intuitions concerning childhood, are keen, often terribly sharp. The unrelenting finality of the boy's hatred for his father and his precipiced contempt for his young sister is frightening. There is something as shocking as a naked bone in the simplicity of his childhood love, not in its tenderness, for it is not tender, but in the frankness of its imposition and acceptance of duty, in its keenness and unmixed reality. There are no excesses, no failures, no weaknesses, no slackening of the spirit permitted by its rules, not for one moment. In that respect a child's love is like civil war. And how this man, driven out of his own land with memories too horrible for contemplation, grasps the importance of secrecy to a boy! It is as if great troubles, secret to him, had made him a boy again. That nothing must be told to the impure adults was the rule of José's bloodthirsty tribe of warrior boys. It is as if Sender, being compelled to reorder his thinking, deliberately returned to that town in which the spirit was whole and hard and pure.

But not out of weakness and not in order to indulge the emotions with the idealized remembrance of irresponsible days. (My God! the child's world of this novel is burdened with knife-edged responsibilities, above all to himself.) There, I think, one finds a rule by which to distinguish the escapist return to childhood from the purposeful research. Sender must go back, as his José Garcés must do, not in order to comfort the heart with dreams of a Golden Epoch, but in order to collect and concentrate himself, to pare off the impurities, particularly the uncleanness of the political world of compromise and ungodly tolerance. That is what the inscription on the

title page means. "Nomads, before they tear your linen sheets and eat your calves raw in the square, like to gather up their memories in order to put them out of reach of reprisals." Exactly. You shall not destroy the murderous heart by pecking at its component parts. José Garcés writes in one of his sonnets:

These mountain shepherds, leaving  
to the care  
Of dogs their cabins, put their sandals on  
And to the confines of themselves  
have gone  
Thus shod.

And thus shod, they have turned "from God's praise to God's laws" and, before long, the hearts of the Spanish fascists are like to be hand-scooped out of their chests.

This return to childhood is a kind of voluntary seclusion, a monasticism of the spirit that is far more rigorous than the imprisonments which have been made to serve the same purpose by other writers. Malraux and Sender are very different writers. Two years ago I would have said that the Frenchman was the man of greater imaginative force, for the Spaniard had not yet learned to express his sensations wholly in images and concrete experiences. Malraux had grasped that necessity and carried it out with quivering intensity. Sender has now accomplished this also. The point is, however, that both have used their almost hallucinatory force to analyze the single duty of contemporary man, of becoming a man. "Day of Wrath," an underestimated book, had that for its theme. The impassioned Kassner, if he seems to possess rather too many resources in the outer world, is compelled to re-establish himself, and in so doing he helps us, or terrifies us. Koestler does the same thing, with even greater intensity in his brilliant obscurities. One must recapture the sense of heroism, says Koestler, as Malraux once said it, though the Hungarian writer so far has not squarely confronted his real problem and so fails to do more than lacerate himself and us. But what Malraux's prison and Koestler's torturers compelled their threatened men to do (Now you think you have escaped, says the torturer to his fleeing victim; just try to find yourself!) exile has made Sender do. That is the significance of this simple, astonishing book. That is why it is so singularly pure, for against its one banal memory there are set within it scores of startling and altogether beautiful things. José Garcés well says of it in his poem to Valentina, when they were both in boarding school, "This wind from Sobrarbe—Will set your hair on fire." But unlike that child's love, it will not "make your thoughts lie quiet."

## Introducing an Important New Writer

*DANGLING MAN.* By Saul Bellow. New York: The Vanguard Press. 1944. 191 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by NATHAN L. ROTHMAN

THIS is the journal of a man dangling between two worlds, or, perhaps more accurately, between two moments of existence in the one world we know, a split second of non-being extended immeasurably like a fissure growing beneath his feet. There might be many accidents in life to produce just such a hiatus: that time, for example, when a love affair that has crowded everything else out of the earth and sky is over and gone, and one gropes tenderly with hand and toe to learn to walk again; or a time when one is cast up out of the world, upon a reef somewhere, a magic mountain, as was Thomas Mann's Hans Castorp. In Saul Bellow's book it is a very common, contemporary accident that throws his man into the air to dangle. He is in that period between registration and induction, a matter of months filled with investigation (he is a Canadian and there is data to produce, papers, tests, records) and waiting. But this does not matter; it is a device for setting free the mind of Joseph (whose second name we do not ever learn) from the pattern of orderly living, and keeping it suspended out of pattern.

He is born again, free of the weight of accumulated attitudes, free of the people who reach to hold him (he is apart now, lonely and questioning), free of the emotions that have hitherto thought for him. He begins to see with the dispassionate eye of the painter—the mole in the armhollow, the vein beneath the surface of the skin, a stove's light in a room. He be-

gins to think with the dispassionate mind of the anthropologist, beholding his wife, his father, his niece, his friends, the people in his boarding-house, as though he had just landed upon their continent, having foreknowledge of them with the freedom to examine coldly what he knows. And he examines his knowledge of himself, his world, the events in it, with a rare and miraculous honesty. Now, as never before and probably never again, he can say exactly what he feels without adding to it what he ought to feel, subtracting what he ought not. These pages, brief and pungent, are filled with inspired perception, from that true statement I have never seen anywhere else save in Joyce, ("The child feels that his parents are pretenders; his real father is elsewhere and will some day come to claim him"), to such moments of self-searching as the credo on Page 84, which begins: "I would rather die in the war than consume its benefits . . . I would rather be a victim than a beneficiary . . ."

Here, as elsewhere in literature when the mind is subject to the pressure of examination, it splits and turns upon itself in question. Joseph holds dialogue with his other self, whom he terms Tu As Raison Aussi, and even when he is talking to others it is not the ordinary words of outer discussion that he addresses to them, but the searching words that only he himself can answer. He understands their distrust almost as though he can see through them to the back; they are like cards he can turn over. The fact is he has been endowed with an extra dimension, and so long as he has it he has the gift of prophecy. It will drop from him, we feel, when he is at last inducted, when the spell breaks and he falls back into the heat of action. It is only at this point of suspension, where Bellow has caught him, that Joseph possesses this rare, cold, clarity of vision. In this sense his is an interesting war document, his judgment upon the war world before he plunges beneath its surface. We shall read many afterthoughts when the war is over; this is a last forethought.

I have been trying to say also, in all this, that Saul Bellow is a writer of great original powers. Quite apart from the pressing interest of the material he has chosen for his book (a first novel, incidentally), he writes with obvious style and mastery, with a sharp cutting to the quick of language, with a brilliance of thought. This is a successful piece of work everywhere you examine it, and ought to be the herald of a fine literary career.



Saul Bellow