

the illusion that condemns a good many of our academic critics to dullness. Wilson, however, brings life and letters much closer together than a critic like Saintsbury: one of the very best pieces in this book, for example, is an essay on Emily Post, a beautiful exercise of Wilson's social imagination.

Since the tastes are individual, one naturally disagrees with some of them here. The "Dissenting Opinion on Franz Kafka," something of a bombshell among the avant garde when it appeared a few years ago in *The New Yorker*, was a necessary corrective to the Kafka cult, but it now looks a little too severe in its condemnation of Kafka's failure. Kafka's life is surely the record of a failure, and it is absurd to place him beside a novelist like Dostoevsky, as the cult has done, or to claim for him a rank beside his contemporaries Proust and Joyce. Nevertheless, Kafka's work, fragmentary and incomplete as it is, does have a stark and monumental strength that ruins often have, and he would not have caught on among so many younger writers if his work did not have the extraordinary power to jolt the imagination.

What was happening to literature during the Forties? Wilson's "chronicle" is embedded in review after review of best sellers, but he also provides a summarizing essay, "Thoughts on Being Bibliographed," which puts together the details of the picture. During the Thirties and Forties, Wilson tells us, the two chief menaces to American literary talent became Hollywood and Henry Luce, organizations that absorbed writers into a kind of collective anonymity. The writers who did not go after the big money wound up in the academy, where they were absorbed into another kind of corporate existence, obstructive in its own way to the practice of literature. All this, Wilson notes, has brought about an interruption in the "American Renaissance" in literature that began in the Teens and Twenties. But he merely describes the course of the disease to date, offers no prognosis and no panacea. It is a sign of his own great merit that he himself has survived the wear and tear of these periods, stubbornly resisting all encroachments on his identity as a writer.

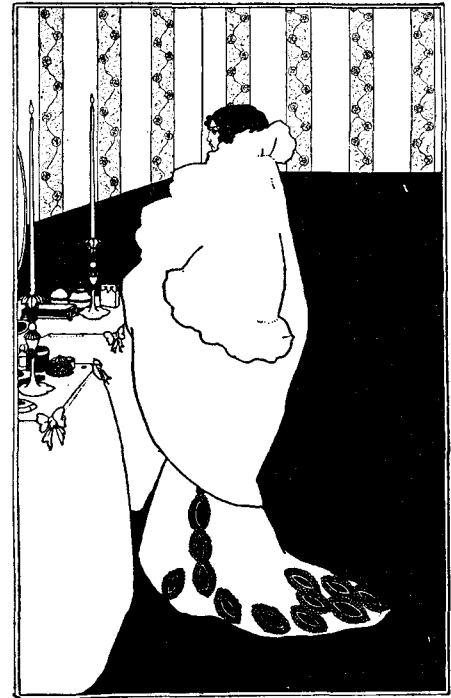
This particular essay and the book as a whole suggest the idea of the great work for which all of Wilson's career hitherto has been a preparation: a literary history of his time, in which all his gifts for historical narrative, never quite realized in his fiction, might be brought into full cooperation with his great critical intelligence and taste. It would be a pity if we never had this work from his hands.

Belles-Lettres Notes

WORDSWORTH: A Tribute. By George Mallaby. Macmillan. \$1.50. In the past year, the centenary of Wordsworth's death, a great many books about him have appeared. Mr. Mallaby's book is brief, neat, and well turned; he writes from the viewpoint of the literate amateur who wishes to pay tribute to Wordsworth by showing how much the poet has given him in spiritual sustenance and esthetic delight. As he works his way through the important poems, explaining and "appreciating," he is genuinely persuasive. A former schoolmaster (and now secretary general of the European Joint Planning Staff), he sometimes sounds as though he were confronting a roomful of earnest boys and trying to "sell them" Wordsworth; but that uncomfortably urgent tone of style is, fortunately, not long-lasting. And why, alas, must he denigrate the eighteenth century to praise the romantics! That was what he was taught as a schoolboy, when Matthew Arnold's pronouncements on poetry were gospel. The Augustan and the romantic poets were artists after their own individual and different fashions; and it is not necessary to put them on opposite ends of a seesaw.

A BIOGRAPHER'S NOTEBOOK. By Hector Bolitho. Macmillan. \$3.50. Most of this slight volume is not, unfortunately, a notebook but only a display of biographical remnants, several in the form of raw letters. The longest section consists of a series written during the last four years of her life by Queen Marie of Roumania to an American friend she had never met. Although intended as the crown jewel of the book, these letters hardly seem worth printing, for they are verbose, sententious, banal, sentimental, and so filled with self-pity that they hardly elicit the reader's sympathy when their writer had so much for herself. The rest of the book is more rewarding. It includes brief biographical sketches of young King Hussein and of the Prince Consort's mother, and three short series of letters: of an English Quaker family, of a companion to Victoria's eldest son, and the witty and informative ones of Mowbray Morris, the Victorian journalist.

The curious thing about Mr. Bolitho's notebook is that he fails to see who his best subject is—himself. Two pieces in his book show this. His diary of a trip to Rumania is except for his fatuous admiration for HRH lively and interesting; but the brightest piece is his diary of a visit to King Abdallah. Here, where he is a Jeeves wandering through the Arabian Nights,



—From "The Yellow Book."

"La Dame aux Camélias," by Beardsley.

he is an acute observer, equipped with humor, intelligence, and perception. Unlike some of his biographical subjects he knows his limitations and operates very amusingly within them. If he ever produces a real biographer's notebook it will be worth reading.

THE YELLOW BOOK: A Selection. Compiled by Norman Denny. Viking. \$3.75. When *The Yellow Book* appeared as a London quarterly in the 1890's its naughtiness struck Victorian readers as wicked; today, to judge from this excellent selection, its naughtiness is mild indeed. But it offers us instead different and varied pleasures. Mr. Denny has chosen what he considers a representative cross-section of the magazine's stories, essays, poetry, and art and has prefaced them with a neat and amusing note. To convey the flavor of the magazine the Bodley Head, its original publishers, have produced it with the same squat format, yellow covers, and even some of the text from original plates. It is a handsome book both in its own right and as an authentic period piece.

The selections whose attractiveness is merely their nostalgic perfume may be enjoyed in passing; there is more substantial writing besides. There are stories by Henry James, George Gissing, Arnold Bennett, Ernest Dowson, John Buchan; essays by Max Beerbohm, Richard Le Gallienne, and an uproarious criticism of journalistic book reviewing by the editor, Henry Harland. The poetry is its weakest department and the art its most var-

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Fiction. *With the outlook for the human race bleak and seemingly insoluble, it is small wonder that many novelists are looking to distant and imagined lands for their settings. Like James Ramsey Ullman, whose "River of the Sun" was reviewed here last week, H. E. Bates turns to a faraway place, Kashmir, for the locale of "The Scarlet Sword." Another escapist, Rumer Godden, has frankly borrowed the idea and characters of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" for "A Breath of Air." . . . Meanwhile some young writers still look back to their World War II experiences. Many critics have been declaring that this theme is now exhausted, but they may be proved wrong by such works as M. R. Kadish's "Point of Honor" and James Jones's "From Here to Eternity"; the latter is already stirring wide interest in the book world a month ahead of its publication.*

Prospero in Modern Dress

A BREATH OF AIR. By Rumer Godden. New York: The Viking Press. 280 pp. \$3.

By BEN RAY REDMAN

IN THIS troubled age of ours, when the world is more than ever too much with us, many readers are sure to find Mr. van Loomis's island—the scene of Rumer Godden's modern version of "The Tempest"—a most attractive place. Known to its natives as Manoa but renamed Terraqueous by its distinguished purchaser, this jewel lies in a reach of the Indian Ocean that is not crossed by steamer lanes; and the senses of its inhabitants have never been assaulted by the smell of petrol, by motion pictures, or by radio's incessant voice. Here are men and women who are strangers to wars and rumors of war, to atom bombs and economic crises, fifth columns and campaign oratory, mass production and mass consumption, gadgets and money.

Under Mr. van Loomis's benignant despotism and efficient direction these people have richly realized the potentialities of their self-sufficient island, while retaining their ancient heritage of belief, custom, and ritual. Having

all that they need for a contented life they do not even know how to desire more than they have. Of course Filipino, the clever house boy, is an exception, and, as his master says, there is no stopping the Filipinos of this world. But I am speaking of Terraqueous as it was when it still lay beneath the spell of its modern Prospero; when the potency of his magic was still unquestioned; when Charis was growing to maturity, and Mr. van Loomis had not yet realized that there are limits to a father's ability to provide for a daughter's happiness.

Actually the island's golden age is ending just as Miss Godden's story begins. At that very instant the little empire is threatened from within by the unrest that has begun to plague Charis and Filipino and from without by the approach of Doubleday Valentine's plane, storm-driven off course.

The corruption of Filipino had begun when Charis taught him to read, for the art of reading made him free of a stack of old magazines, which revealed to him the wonders of what we are content to call civilization. His mind became "a shimmering maze of American advertisements, than which nothing can more subtly fill the mind; it was a maze of typewriters and newsprint, of race horses and refrigerators; petrol and brown and white shoes. . . ." He had also discovered and devoutly swallowed the fiery liquor of Tom Paine's "Rights of Man."

As for Charis, her "lot on the island was queenly, but it was not enviable; if she was near-royalty, she was very lonely." Not when she was a child, for no childhood could have been happier. But there came a time when her nurse's devoted care, her pets and her pony, her father's skilful teaching of all the subjects he knew so well,

and the adulation of servants and islanders were not enough. There came a year when with the arrival of "the courtship month" she faced the fact that there was no young man on Terraqueous who could aspire to love her. There was one young man who was not a native; but he was Mario—and Mario was the island's Caliban.

Into this setting and situation flies Valentine with his companion and mechanic, McGinty. Valentine, at the age of thirty, is an international celebrity who has won fame as playwright, producer, actor, and film director. Now he is on his way from Australia to England, where he is scheduled to put a new play into production. And McGinty? Well, he could hardly be described better than in Mr. van Loomis's words: "The world today is peopled with McGintys. . . . McGinty is the mob. The image of the mob." He is all that Filipino foolishly dreams of being. He is also obstinate, resourceful, and determined that he and Valentine shall escape from Terraqueous. Mr. van Loomis on the other hand is determined that they shall not leave until certain matters have been arranged to his satisfaction. And Mr. van Loomis is also resourceful.

Miss Godden's novel, then, is not only a love story; it is also a drama of contrast and conflict, in which two cultures meet—two philosophies of life—and in which youth is at odds with age. But it is a sprightly drama, however mean and drab the picture that it presents of our Western civilization; a drama that gives us sad truths camouflaged in comedy's bright motley. Writing to entertain, Miss Godden succeeds by virtue of a skill that conceals effort. Always in easy command of her material she surpasses her average excellence in a few descriptions of scene and action: for example in her account of how Mr. van Loomis and his native helpers hide Valentine's plane behind the waterfall in the marine cave. Yet she has failed, I think, to realize fully the possibilities inherent in the relationship of her twentieth-century Miranda and Ferdinand; she has only lightly sketched the interplay of emotion and thought between the girl who knows much in theory but almost nothing by experience, and the sophisticated man whose knowledge and experience, wide though they are, have never before included a girl like Charis. As a result a reader may well feel that Miss Godden has left some promises unfulfilled, that she has been rather less successful with her hero and heroine than with her supporting cast, and that "A Breath of Air" could have been a richer, fuller book. But it seems rude to express such feelings when it is as it stands so enjoyable.

