Wistful Amusement

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH HUMOR. By Louis Cazamian. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. 421 *pp.* $6.

By Bergen Evans

IN this volume Professor Cazamian continues the study of the development of English humor which he began more than twenty-five years ago. In 1930 he published a history of English humor from the earliest times to the Renaissance and the present book incorporates this previous volume and his "L'Humor de Shakespeare" (Paris, 1945) and carries the study down to the Restoration. He had once dreamed of examining English humor in its entirety, but "the passing of time, unexpected events, and the pressure of other work" have compelled him to abandon this ambitious hope and to terminate his study at the very threshold of what he feels to be the great period of English humor, the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the centuries of Sterne and Dickens.

He believes humor to be a peculiarly English attitude towards life, "the wistful amusement of the serious minded," which has become not merely a mode of joking but an orientation of the whole mind, one which at its highest "expresses all the mental powers of a man" and gives him, in a weary and unintelligible world, the possession of his own soul.

We first hear of "Merry England" (in the "Cursor Mundi") in the first years of the fourteenth century, but Froissart's famous observation that the English take their fun sadly more aptly applies to Chaucer, the great literary figure of the century. In his writing, perhaps for the first time in all literature, humor is the soul and essence. There is a sly naïvete in his manner, a whimsical, yet not wholly affected, retention of the freshness of youth in mature, disillusioned experience, a deep interest in all of life tinged with a wistful and pitying amusement.

From Chaucer to the Renaissance, M. Cazamian grants, is an "almost unrelieved anticlimax." Then Shakespeare explodes, in humor, as in everything else, incomparable. But no immediate change is apparent. The slower, more general, development was shaped rather by Jonson who impressed a new meaning on the old physiological "humor," a meaning which, as so often happens, became, in its turn, an impediment to further development. Not until "Hudibras" was Jonson's influence to be finally replaced and not until Addison and Steele, a generation later, did modern English humor fully emerge.

Perhaps the idea of "development" impedes Professor Cazamian and makes his book dull in spots. Like most historians of English literature, he is overly-concerned with "predecessors" and labors too hard to find connections in resemblances. He is at his best in his direct analyses of individual writers and works; the sections on Chaucer and Shakespeare are the best of their kind and his comments on the minor Elizabethan playwrights and on the metaphysical poets are penetrating and fresh.

Not the least of the book's values is its continual digressions on humor itself. Indeed, it is to be wished that Professor Cazamian would do a short essay on this subject alone. Falstaff's "a jest with a sad brow" and the "doleful matter merrily set down" which the clown in "A Winter's Tale" loved to hear "sung lamentably" serve him well as preliminary definitions. He will not allow humor to be "coextensive with mere fun"; there must be a special restraint, an apparent unconsciousness of the effect produced. But only apparent; the true humorist is fully aware that he is odd and that his oddity is amusing. Understatement is indispensable: "just as good manners will repress the selfish display of the natural man," so education and refinement will lead to "a fondness for understatement."

The English have always loved and protected idiosyncrasy and cherished "the tactics of apparent unawareness" in order to give a pleasant sense of cooperating actively in the final effect of merriment.

Bergen Evans, author of "The Natural History of Nonsense," is professor of English at Northwestern University.

Life vs. Thought

THE WITHERED BRANCH: Six Studies in the Modern Novel. By D. S. Savage. New York: Pelligrini & Cudahy. 207 *pp.* $3.50.

By Maxwell Geismar

D. S. SAVAGE is an excellent, original, and sometimes infuriating critic. These six essays on E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, Hemingway, Joyce, and Margiad Evans (an interesting English novelist not well known here) contain some of the best things I have read lately in the field of literary criticism. Mr. Savage is distressing, I suppose, because just on the edge of real achievement, he will take a dizzy jump into the absolute.

Part of the book's brilliance and value comes from its complete repudiation of the so-called New Critics (those venerable, honorific, solemn descendants of the Eliot-Pound-Richards triangle). Mr. Savage disposes of the question of "technique" straight off by comparing it with "a much more primary and fundamental activity, which I propose to call *vision.*" All art is related to a social context, he says quite correctly, to the personality of the artist, and to the outside truth of the life it portrays. It is nonsense to omit these elements in appraising works of art, it is impossible to ignore them.

What counts is how the critic operates in these areas. And I might add that it is good to have the solid, durable elements of both art and criticism stressed again (or even mentioned) with the eloquence and insight that Mr. Savage has at his command. He sees the modern literary mind as suffering from a central split between the cult of estheticism—which separates art from life—and the trend towards "vitalism," which exalts raw life—or "gross vitalistic animality"—at the expense of both culture and art. In support of his thesis he has an excellent study of E. M. Forster as an instance of the "Liberal Imagination" in Lionel Trilling's bewildered vocabulary—that is to say, as the epitome of a timid—or a terrified—middle-class refinement, which takes refuge in sensibility. Not Liberal; not imaginative.

Mr. Savage is quite devastating on the cult of Virginia Woolf, too. "The legend of Virginia Woolf as an 'artist'

Maxwell Geismar is the author of "Writers in Crisis" and "The Last of the Provincials," part of a long study of the novel in America.

pure and simple . . . is one which can have taken root only in a society in which there exists the most lamentable indifference both to life and to art." There are sharp analyses, on the other hand, of modern mystics and primitives (Huxley, Joyce) who are split between a false moralism and a false sensualism. The hitch in Mr. Savage's own system of values, which is admirable up to this point, is that he jumps from here to the notion that truth is Absolute, and related only to God, or a religious affirmation of life.

I myself believe that this can be just as fatal to an artist's work as the lack of any values or beliefs whatsoever—and that the great works of literature, at least, have been in the human and not in the supernatural area. It is precisely in the realm of pragmatic and relative truth—and not in that of fixed, immutable prejudices—that the American tradition has been rooted; and what would some of the eighteenth-cenutry English novelists say to Mr. Savage's thesis?

A novelist's belief must come from within him, too, and reflect the quality of the life around him—and when this fails, everything else is a recourse of desperation or, as in some modern instances, something of a fad. And one remembers the early Dreiser who could never get enough of "materiality"—wonderful advice for the novelist. But if you read Mr. Savage's book with this in mind (and skip his Hemingway essay, which is poor) you will find the rest of it on a high level.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 476

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 476 will be found in the next issue.

ZDNGOABCNL PREPFB

HGOGZNSB; RMKG

BMQGSNQGB NOTYDGB.

BGOGWP.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 475

Many of our cares are but a morbid way of looking at our privileges.

—Walter Scott

The Broods of Brahmins

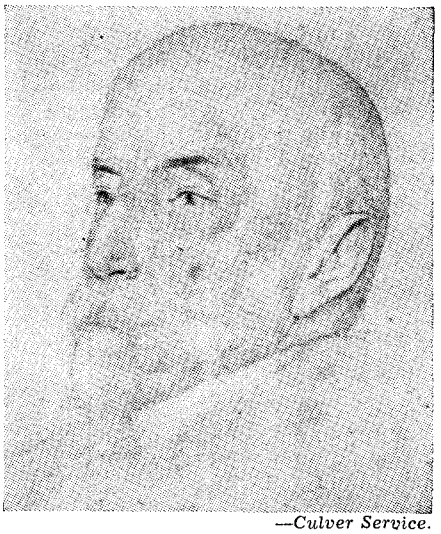
HENRY ADAMS: SCIENTIFIC HISTORIAN. By William H. Jordy. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press. 327 *pp.* $5.

By Robert E. Spiller

THE historians have always been worried by Henry Adams, because they could not escape from the fascination of both the man and his theory and yet they could accept neither as up to professional standards. Any man who can give up an established position as teacher and scholar to become a tourist at large is obviously a dilettante; any theory of history that sacrifices logic to a pair of symbols is little more than an old man's whimsy. Yet this man wrote one of the most scholarly of histories of the United States, as well as two books that shocked a generation by the courage and profundity of their thought. He declared himself a failure; so he was.

Mr. Jordy, an historian, has had the courage of youth to face this paradox once more, and his conclusions are essentially those of his elders even though he has done the job with such liberality of spirit and thoroughness of workmanship that it should never have to be done again. Starting with the traditional premise that Henry Adams was primarily a "scientific" historian, he carefully distinguishes him from the "literary" historians like Parkman. He then analyzes the "History" on its given terms (without asking why Adams was interested in those sixteen years when the Adams family was not in the White House). The "Phase" essay and the "Letter" are then given complete study against the background of the science of the day. Finally, some cursory remarks on Adams's old age and its literary consequences in the "Education" and the "Chartres" lead to the traditional conclusion that Adams failed by his own standards. There is nothing new in all this, even to the lurking feeling that the historian (in this case, Mr. Jordy) has succeeded in everything except in convincing himself that his study was ill-advised because his subject really was a failure. Adams once more has the last word and it is once more an ironic chuckle. His greatness lies beyond historical thinking and historical method.

The novelty and value in Mr. Jordy's study lie in its central thesis, that Adams was a "disillusioned Comtist." It has been pretty generally assumed that Comte was a primary influence on the later and theoretical aspects of Adams's life and that the "History" was to no great degree influenced by the French philosopher. Mr. Jordy demonstrates that the reverse was actually the case; that because of Comte "the 'History' reflected the central problem of conservative liberalism of the mid-nineteenth century, that is, the role of leadership in relation to the growing democratization of an industrial society"; that Comte was responsible for the nationalistic and moral optimism of the early work and not for the pessimism of the later period; and that the essay on "Phase" marked the end rather than the beginning of the Comtean influence. The belief in degradation and catastrophe which prompted the irony and cynicism was a result of the failure of the Comtean dream of a positive sociology which could be both scientific and historical. Late nineteenth-century science was searched reluctantly for a substitute formula.



—*Culver Service.*

Henry Adams—non-professional fascination.

Other unhappy findings of this tireless researcher are that Adams did not derive anything much from Willard Gibbs, that he relied on newspaper clippings for many of his facts on science, that his logic was shaky because his facts were unreliable or misunderstood, and that no one in 1910 even took the "Letter" seriously. On the other hand, Mr. Jordy is quite willing to concede that the esthetic side of Adams, even though not within the scope of this book, may be important, and he pauses on the threshold of Romanticism with more than a wistful look inside the forbidden realm. The fact is, of course, that the literary (rather than the historical) objectives

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Robert E. Spiller, professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, is one of the editors of the "Literary History of the United States."