

The Ebb of Maturity

"The Quest of Alain-Fournier," by **Robert Gibson** (Yale University Press. 295 pp. \$4), is an examination of the art and method of a French writer who published only one novel in his short life, but that a masterpiece.

By Roger Shattuck

ALAIN-FOURNIER, who was killed at the age of twenty-seven during the early weeks of the First World War, wrote one superb novel, "Le Grand Meaulnes"—translated as "The Wanderer." It might almost be considered the "Huckleberry Finn" of modern French literature, without Twain's latent humor but with a profoundly poetic sense of landscape and feminine mystery. Robert Gibson has written a sympathetic, gently informative, uninflated biography of Alain-Fournier that gradually works into an examination of the creative processes which produced the unforgettable novel.

First published in 1913, "The Wanderer" concerns two boys whose adventures in the French countryside in search of a "mysterious domain" hover between adolescence and maturity. Meaulnes, the unpredictable hero, finds and loses his love in unfulfilled

quest. François, the narrator, discovers the sadness and beauty of life. The "mysterious domain" turns out to be their own irrevocably ebbing youth. The novel was hailed as a great achievement by such different authorities as Conrad and Péguy, received four votes for the Prix Goncourt, and has been read as a minor classic ever since. Only a few critics have complained about the irresolution of the ending.

"The Wanderer" has usually been treated as a great work of fantasy recapturing the experience of adolescence in highly poetic prose. Mr. Gibson demonstrates that almost every incident in the novel has its counterpart in the author's restless life. Alain-Fournier revised, rejected, and expurgated until he achieved a story of astonishing purity. Yet it remains his own life retold. Mr. Gibson's critical statements are of this nature: "To sum up, it would seem that Alain-Fournier wrote his novel somewhat like an artist building a mosaic out of his early writings and reminiscences, both vague and vivid, hitherto unexpressed, rather than that other more common type of storyteller, who embarks on his narrative like an explorer on a voyage, borne along by the irresistible tide of inspiration . . ."

What Mr. Gibson declines to examine is the particular nature and significance of the relationship between art and life in Alain-Fournier's career. His is only one instance of the relationship, to be contrasted with that of other authors whose life and art cross in more dramatic fashion: Oscar Wilde, Alfred Jarry, André Gide, Apollinaire, André Malraux, etc. That "The Wanderer" is an extract, the essence of Alain-Fournier's life, changes not one whit the literary quality of the novel.

Told as it is with fidelity and understanding, the life makes interesting reading. It is only unfortunate that, after the easy candor of the early sections, the circumstances surrounding Alain-Fournier's last love affair have to be suppressed for reasons of discretion. Blessed with a happy childhood in the countryside of central France, twice failing his examinations for the École Normale Supérieure, inevitably disappointed in love because of his intense idealism, Alain-Fournier never overcame a



Robert Gibson—"tolerant, relaxed."

profound "dissatisfaction with adult life." His "quest" for values to live by impelled him to reach out toward his lost childhood, toward promise of spiritual grace in religion, and toward the love of one briefly glimpsed woman as inaccessible as Beatrice. He found none of them, yet they guided him to the end. It is a sad but not a tragic or depressing tale. Alain-Fournier had too much vitality not to have lived his life richly.

ONE further literary landmark is partially illuminated by this book: the close and enduring friendship between Alain-Fournier and Jacques Rivière, later an editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. The two young men met in the lycée of Lakanal near Paris and corresponded from the age of eighteen to twenty-seven. The great exchange of letters between Gide and Claudel, recently translated into English, reveals the spiritual struggle of the new century; the Rivière-Alain-Fournier correspondence, not yet translated, portrays in intimate detail the literary, intellectual, and spiritual maturing of two very different young men who grew up in the shadow of Gide and Claudel. Alain-Fournier especially attains moments of excruciating self-awareness in his letters. "It is in this way that my art is now being forced towards the essential passage. I choose from all the moments only those marked by grace. I am searching for the key of escape to the land of heart's desire—and it is perhaps Death, after all."

Alain-Fournier deserves this warm-hearted book. Mr. Gibson's tolerant, relaxed pace of investigation prevents him from asking questions which search beyond his subject.

This Is a Night

By Elizabeth Coatsworth

THIS is a night on which to pity cats
Hunting through dripping hedge-
rows,
Making wet way
Through grasses heavy with rain,
Their delicate stepping
Tense with distaste,
Their soft and supple coats
Sodden, for all their care,
This is a night
To pity cats which have no house to
go to,
No stove, no saucer of milk, no
lowered hand
Sleeking a head, no voice to say
"Poor kitty,"
This is a night
On which to weep for outcasts, for
all those
Who know the rain but do not know
the shelter.

Aristotle Alive!

"The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry," by R. S. Crane (University of Toronto Press. 214 pp. \$5.50), offers an analysis of the two most influential kinds of contemporary criticism and proposes another to supplement and counteract them. Below the volume is reviewed by Randall Jarrell, author of "Poetry and the Age" and "The Seven-League Crutches."

By Randall Jarrell

R. S. CRANE is a distinguished scholar, the former chairman of the department of English at the University of Chicago. His volume "The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry" is composed of five lectures which he delivered at the University of Toronto in 1952. They are lectures about the two most influential sorts of contemporary criticism, and about a very different kind, an Aristotelian kind, which would supplement and counteract these.

This word "Aristotelian" will make some of us grunt, some of us beam, and some of us exclaim, "Oh yes, now I remember—Crane's the man that's been starting that neo-Aristotelian school of criticism." So far as most of us are concerned, to hear of such a project is to hate it. We feel, more or less: "If it's a good thing to do, surely in all this time somebody would have done it"; and we remember that during a surprisingly large proportion of that time somebody *was* doing it. Mr. Crane's school of criticism comes to bat with, so to speak, two millennia against it.

But as we read we see that Mr. Crane is persuasive and judicious and reasonable, that his arguments aren't lofty sneers, or rhetoric, or appeals to prejudice, but real arguments; we dismiss this general prejudice of ours, and try to make specific judgments worthy of Mr. Crane and of ourselves. Most of us will be pleased when he warns us of his anti-Hegelian turn of mind, delighted when we see that he really does believe in seeing what great artists did, rather than in saying what they should have done. He is, most of the time, empirical. And he does not believe in some ideal form of criticism which has the virtues of all and the vices of none, but sees that the different ways of criticizing,

languages of criticism, are themselves as different and contradictory as works of art are. They too have the defects of their qualities and the qualities of their defects—to want Arnold's criticism just like Hopkins's is as stupid as to want "The Scholar Gypsy" just like "Carrión Comfort."

Mr. Crane divides modern critics of poetry into two schools: those who take an analytic, systematic interest in the language and meanings of poetry as these are differentiated from the language and meanings of prose; those who apply to poetry the insights of psychoanalysis and anthropology. Most of both sorts are New. Gazing at them from calm, distant, commonsensical eyes, Mr. Crane describes, with reflective detachment, his critics' midnight marches, routs, sieges, voyages, their all-but-mortal combats, their—I was about to say, their discoveries and victories . . . but these, alas! he does not describe. He does intelligent justice to their vices and

exaggerations and absurdities—some of these pages are, in their mild, matter-of-fact way, crushing—but he neglects with methodical thoroughness the insight and imagination and affection that are so signally present in some of them, so signally absent in others. From his sensible, unfavorable, and rather unjust survey you can learn a great deal of what was wrong with the criticism of our time, and almost nothing of what was right with it.

And this is natural: Mr. Crane's analysis is, if not a vindictive one, a kind of preparatory one—he is setting the stage for his own special kind of criticism. He explains it, lists its limitations, honestly admits that it derives from a quite unorthodox interpretation of Aristotle; and then he talks, at length, with enthusiasm, about all that it would be, all that it would do for literature, criticism, education. (He can't talk about its faults because, after all, hardly any of it exists to be faulty.) Reading this celebration of the hypothetical virtues of an imaginary criticism, we smile, but it's a sympathetic smile; we all have a fellow-feeling for inventors, Utopia-imaginers, and we enjoy Mr. Crane's enthusiasm and emotion—we had been troubled, earlier, by his calm



Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

NOBEL PI

Dorothy E. Smith of Cave Creek, Arizona, offers the scrambled names of twenty Nobel Prize winners in literature, followed by the equally scrambled titles of twenty books by these same authors (not necessarily the books generally considered their authors' best). On a basis of 2.5 points credit for each piece of information sought, a score of 60 is good, from 62.5 to 70 very good, and above 70 very darned good. Answers on page 54.

AUTHORS

1. Rigidly Dark Pun.
2. Marge Also Fell.
3. Rue Lame Cinema Trick.
4. Bar Great, Hard Nation.
5. Ran Lean-to Café.
6. Nine Can't Beat Jove.
7. Billy Ate Swami.
8. Hero Warned Beggars.
9. Grind Studies.
10. Willis Races In.
11. Drain Edge
12. Lorn Maid Lorna.
13. I Lured Loping Ali.
14. Lounge, Lienee.
15. Black Purse.
16. Then Master Sails, Too.
17. Vin Nubian.
18. Mut Sank Hun.
19. Kick In, Wheezy Siren.
20. Hangmen Tap Arthur.

TITLES

- Those Jests Riot Us.
- Vets Relish Fun On Date.
- Rebel Hid Tub.
- Regent Heard.
- Very Modern; Often Blasts Reich.
- No Wife Shares Plot.
- Fat Heron Shed Idle Tears.
- Ran Honest, Docile Land.
- Rival Starts Neat Drink.
- Earnest Tim.
- Fie, Chester; Not True.
- Helen Counted Hats.
- Said Eery Mouse.
- Guards Reline Tent.
- The Hot Rod Age.
- Attends Whale.
- Save My Toil.
- Hoot Owl Fighters.
- Dad Ferris Won.
- Bad. Now Free.