

constant carping against the cruel parsimony of both Nature and Man are real enough; surely this is the way life was. But his unrelieved rancor finally grows wearisome, as does some of the explicit recounting of ordinary incidents. One wishes that Mrs. Hudson had been more selective, and that she had built more drama and tension into the incidents depicted.

It is the child Lucy who clings to the memory: her talks with her grandfather, her discoveries of the prairie spring, the fantasies she creates out of her own lonely need. With all its careful documentation of the Great Depression in the Dakotas—and here Mrs. Hudson succeeds very well—it is a child's-eye view of this harsh, irrational world that gives her novel its greatest distinction and style.

**DREAM MAN AND NIGHTMARE:** It is likely that most women at one time or another have been demonized by the hero of Una Troy's latest novel, "Esmond" (Dutton, \$3.95). He is that composite dream man who leers over the disillusioned housewife's shoulder, cooing the things that good old dependable George no longer coos. In Miss Troy's book, the suave apparition seduces the thirty-eight-old heroine, Mary Murphy, into a dream world that eventually becomes a nightmare.

The Murphy household has droned along for years in the Irish village of Carrigeen. Patrick is about as inattentive a husband as ever stared blankly across the breakfast jam jar. The conflict begins when "Esmond" moves in



and prods Mary into writing escapist magazine romances. The search for material takes her to London and Wales, and the acquisition of two more husbands: a proper-seeming English type who putters about the row house and pats her affectionately; and a mellifluous poet of the Dylan Thomas mold, a mussed Bohemian who lives out of a sleeping bag but wears his huge, hungry heart on the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

Mary's adventures as a migratory mate to three men provide some comic moments, but the effect is far from "laughing comedy." This is a pleasant but lightweight book. Take it out to the hammock, "Mary Murphy," after George has gone to the office and you're ready for your hour of vicarious fun. Don't be afraid. Una Troy is a "nice" novelist and doesn't allow things to become too vicarious. She puts us through three marriages without once mentioning that exasperating bed business.

—WALT MCCASLIN.

## VIEWS

# Eternity in Belles-Lettres

**"The Barbarian Within," by Walter J. Ong, S.J.** (Macmillan, 285 pp. \$5), *views the New Criticism and modern concepts of metaphor, symbolism, and mythology from the standpoint of a roving Latinist.* Gerald Sykes wrote "Children of Light" and "The Hidden Remnant."

By GERALD SYKES

IT IS always refreshing to encounter a "natural," and Father Ong is just that, born to be a priest and born to be a teacher. His scholarly, unpolemical detachment, resting quietly on the unspoken confidence that his church is an anvil on which many hammers have been broken, will make intelligent readers of all faiths and philosophies rejoice that American Catholicism has produced such an able student of the relations between religion and literature. He seems to require a minimum of effort to view the most modern phenomena, such as beatniks or telecasts, under the aspect of eternity; and he takes the discoveries of science, from evolution to relativity, in his stride. He is not provincial. Readers familiar with his "Frontiers in American Catholicism" (1957) will already know this.

In that earlier work Father Ong was concerned with the intricate relationships between American Catholics and the "predominantly anti-Catholic, although, in the large, curiously benign, Protestant culture" in which they have made their home. In the present collection of "fugitive essays" he deals chiefly with the problems of literature. He teaches English at St. Louis University, and approaches the New Criticism and modern concepts of metaphor, symbolism, and mythology from the standpoint of a roving Latinist who seems equally conversant with the poetry of St. Thomas Aquinas and the theories of Cleanth Brooks.

Since his urbane scholarship ranges far, the character of his book will perhaps be indicated by a key passage:

Theology will never *solve* the mysteries of faith at all. In the last analysis the only satisfaction that the natural mind gets from theology is to be able to say, "At least this isn't a mystery. This is clear. The mystery lies from here to here." But the dis-

tance from here to here remains always infinity. . . . For in the case of theology, even abstraction is an inadequate means of managing its material. Abstraction is weak here not only by virtue of its inevitable departure from real individual beings, but also because . . . it does not eliminate the blind spot at the very center of the puzzle. . . . And at this point, the parallel with poetry becomes clear. There are great differences, but there is also a parallel. For both poetry and theology, metaphor is a last, and not quite satisfactory, resort.

Because we Americans are now often more familiar with exotic traditions than we are with our once well-known Christian heritage, this kind of Jesuit teaching might be described as not far from the insoluble Zen *koan*, intended to force the student into a direct personal encounter with reality. Only a rare student, able to penetrate to "the blind spot at the very center of the puzzle," will understand what is being said and how the dilemma can be resolved. There is reason to believe that it was this kind of Jesuit teaching that stimulated James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, by reaction against it, into his kind of scholastic poetry, in which the beauty of his metaphors was meant to compensate him for his loss of faith. What effect such teaching will have up-



on American letters remains to be seen.

My guess is that Father Ong will prove more helpful to teachers than to poets. To read him is to get the impression that faith is not something that must be struggled for incessantly against heavy odds—which most good poets certainly seem to believe with anguish—but, on the contrary, lies always conveniently to hand. In this he differs strikingly from Gabriel Marcel, another Catholic thinker whom he quotes with admiration. Marcel gives the impression that *his* faith may disappear completely any day, unless he fights hard to retain it. But Marcel is a hard-hitting polemicist who accuses the popular Albert Camus, for example, of a “subtly destructive refusal of salvation” that because of his extraordinary talent is doing a great deal of

harm to young and over-impressionable minds.

By comparison Father Ong, like the legendary Ike, “ain’t mad at nobody.” Has a well-known American blandness, which Emerson traced to too much lymph in our blood, overtaken Father Ong? Or is he temperamentally an enemy of debate? Or must any sensitive American find polemic essentially barren in a new land which, unlike older continents, must first seek agreements among men of good will?

Whatever the answers, I must end by reaffirming my gratitude for Father Ong. “The Barbarian Within” is a graceful bid for the Catholics’ full admission into the American cultural scene. The “naturalization papers,” of course, are richly deserved and have in fact already been granted.

person is the only true goal in life; but first we must rigorously define “better” as well as “person.” Since Mr. Samstag carefully skirts any such metaphysical discussion, it is easy enough for him to attack current American concepts without getting us one inch nearer to an existential dialogue of what it means to be a human being.

**CHOP SUEY TO POLITICS:** In “You’re Entitled” (World, \$4), the latest collection of articles from *The Carolina Israelite* and his syndicated newspaper column, Harry Golden writes with notable zest about a range of traditionally popular or currently newsworthy subjects. Characteristically, he concerns himself with such matters as integration, the origin of jokes, prostitutes of the Western world, politicians, the Eichmann trial, kosher Chinese food, nymphomaniacs, and a Jewish girl who became a nun. His observations on these subjects are less profound than good-natured, although at times he is capable of transforming the merely commonplace into something touchingly true and plain.

But this book does not enhance, or even fully support, his reputation for wisdom and wit. Golden likes people who “see the point,” as he puts it, and he relies almost exclusively on a mildly reflective tone and shrewdly chosen anecdotes to make the point. Certainly he does not offer much in the way of argument or analysis, and this is perhaps why the short essay of 100 or 200 words is his characteristic form. His attempts at sustained reasoning often produce such conclusions as this: “While Germany gave Europe its royalty, the House of Hanover could not guarantee *Der Vaterland* a share of the world-wide trade. No common market was established and World Wars I and II were the dreadful result of Germanic frustration.”

Moreover, his wit here is merely an-

## Foolishness and Futility Today

**“The Uses of Ineptitude; or, How Not to Want to Do Better,” by Nicholas Samstag (Obolensky. 147 pp. \$3.50), is a manual-in-reverse, a literary antidote for the self-improvement books. Our reviewer, Sydney J. Harris, writes a syndicated column for the Chicago Daily News.**

By SYDNEY J. HARRIS

AS THE semanticists never tire of telling us, the idea of a book is not the book. Nicholas Samstag had an interesting and valid idea for a book, but he has not written it. At best, he has given us a discursive essay loosely expanded to a volume.

It is perfectly true that the driving ambition for self-improvement has become an American mania; that on all hands we are exhorted to make the most—perhaps too much—of ourselves, intellectually, socially, financially, physically. And it is equally true that often we are indiscriminate in our choices of goals—like Leacock’s famous horseman, riding off in all directions at once.

Mr. Samstag is a tart and sensitive observer of this inchoate scene. He sees its futility, its foolishness, and its dangers—the chief danger being that “self-fulfillment” can never be achieved by the mastery of external arts, that the economy of the psyche can never be balanced by a reckless expenditure of energies, only depleted.

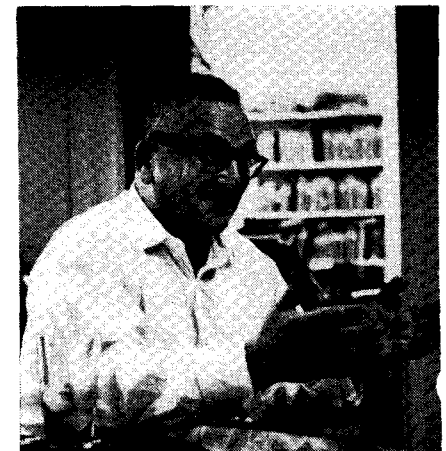
Yet, when all this is said (and it has been said much more concisely by Spinoza, by Thoreau, and many others),

“The Uses of Ineptitude” falls far short of the idea of the book. For one thing, by devoting several chapters to sex and to sports, Mr. Samstag devalues his discussion to the level of a Madison Avenue cocktail hour debate. Surely, the desires to attain proficiency in sex and sports are only minor symptoms of a deeper spiritual malaise.

For lack of a firm philosophical framework of his own—beyond a marked preference for “leisure” and a kind of well-tempered indolence—the author’s argument eventually degenerates into an uninformed attack on the clergy and the psychoanalysts. In the weakest section of the book (and one that reveals the shallowness of his thinking), Mr. Samstag mistakes the popular forms of “soul-saving” and mental health practice for the real roles that theology and psychiatry can play in our lives. His apparent innocence about the influence of such men as Tillich is equaled only by his apparent ignorance of the goals of Freudian psychotherapy.

This is unfortunate, for Mr. Samstag’s general attitude toward our social order is sensible and nicely ironic; and his personal values seem decent and civilized. But he is basically an “against,” and when he feels prompted to make positive suggestions for the attainment of a genuine leisure, he is able to give us merely some fatuous advice on how to “cool off” a love affair, or how to become disenchanted with some of the more unattractive habits of business life.

All this tends to cheapen his essential thesis, and to make the book little more than an *Esquire*-type piece of middle-brow journalism. To want to be a better



Harry Golden—“writes with notable zest about a range of subjects.”