

ing the deep religious feeling that motivated him; he compromised with no one (and politicians least of all) in striving for an individual liberty in America that would make the destiny of the nation a human phenomenon to rank with the age of Cromwell, Luther's Reformation, and the establishment of Christianity.

His passions were superb. Drawn into the antislavery movement in revulsion against the mob rule that murdered Elijah Lovejoy and threatened to lynch Garrison, he could no more have forsaken the cause than he could have embraced a harlot. He accepted the Negro as his brother in the eyes of God, and so he fought with love for a shield. And he fought on all fronts—against a Constitution that protected slavery, against the politicians who bought votes with their empty lip-service to civil rights, against the churches that pandered to the wealthy merchants. He was blind in his rage, never seeing a fault in crazy old John Brown nor a bona-fide virtue in the cautious Lincoln. His trust, unwavering and sublime, was in the inherent dignity and decency of the common man in America, and in that belief he was willing to yield both his life and his fortune.

Ridiculed and vilified, Wendell Phillips had become by the end of the Civil War a force with whom even Presidents had to reckon. To him the war had not been a struggle to save the Union but to solidify the conscience of a nation, and unless that triumph were maintained, then for all he cared the Union could go to hell on a toboggan. Not until the Fifteenth Amendment had been passed did he quit his struggle against the "slave forces," and then he became involved in all sorts of movements, including labor, Prohibition, currency reform, and the suffragettes (although he was never at ease when the girls put on their bloomers).

Theodore Roosevelt believed that Wendell Phillips's radicalism had gone too far—the gap was wide between political reform on Sagamore Hill and spiritual reform on Beacon Hill—but Eugene Debs drew inspiration from Phillips's speeches, and so also did Henry Demarest Lloyd when, in 1894, he startled American complacency with his book, "Wealth Against Common-wealth." American historians, too often reflecting their own complacent backgrounds, have tended to let go the vitality and importance of abolition for the sake of their own academic tranquility. Phillips had always expected them to. But Irving H. Bartlett, taking a calm, thoughtful second look at the evidence, happily reverses that trend.

**TOUJOURS GAI:** When Don Marquis sold his first short story to *Putnam's*, the editor of that magazine called Marquis and began by asking him: "What is your real name?" Marquis replied that he had signed his real name to the story, but *Putnam's* editor wasn't satisfied. "Since your real name sounds so much like a *nom de plume*," he said, "why not choose a *nom de plume* that sounds like a real name?"

Donald Robert Perry Marquis had come from a muddy little town called Walnut in northwestern Illinois, and, after assorted jobs as drugstore clerk, poultry plucker, luncheon cook, sew-



ing-machine agent, delivery-wagon driver, and clothing store menial, he moved from schoolteacher to printer-editor and landed on the *Atlanta News*, where he was quickly introduced to poker, corn whiskey, and Grantland Rice. Largely through this early association with Rice (who then wrote under the name of Henry Grantland

Rice) Don Marquis came on to New York, where he made a permanent literary name for himself as columnist on the *Evening Sun* and later on the *Herald Tribune*, finding time somehow to publish books almost continually and to dramatize such stage hits as "The Old Soak" and "The Dark Hours."

Sadly, to a generation that may never have heard of this near-genius, the characters archy and mehitabel, cockroach and cat extraordinary, mean little now; but in the 1920s and 1930s Don Marquis, F.P.A., B.L.T., and their like wrote a literate sort of newspaper column any paper in America could well afford to re-establish today. They proved F.P.A.'s maxim that nothing was too well written to appear in a newspaper, a forlorn and antique premise in today's mass-capsule journalism.

Edward Anthony's 700-odd-page biography, "O Rare Don Marquis" (Doubleday, \$5.95), truly contains most of the notes and anecdotes for a good book about Don Marquis and his rare news era. Yet it is really extraordinary how slowly the book moves and how wooden its telling on a subject surely worth soaring prose. F.P.A. once said that he thought Marquis "could pack more into a line" than any of his contemporaries. One wishes the same could be said for Mr. Anthony's prolix and diffused near-miss. The subject is there, certainly; and future writers will find the present volume a mother lode of unworked biographical ore about a perfectly remarkable drinker and word painter. —RICHARD L. TOBIN.

## Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

### CANNED GOODS

Herewith a group of words (common and proper terms are both packaged) each of which ends in -CAN. If you can't, you will find an opener on page 86.

- |                                    |               |
|------------------------------------|---------------|
| 1. U.S. political party            | — — — — — CAN |
| 2. innkeeper                       | — — — — — CAN |
| 3. Church of England member        | — — — — — CAN |
| 4. hemisphere inhabitant           | — — — — — CAN |
| 5. defensive tower                 | — — — — — CAN |
| 6. bird                            | — — — — — CAN |
| 7. another bird                    | — — — — — CAN |
| 8. India south of the Narbada      | — — — — — CAN |
| 9. wild dance                      | — — — — — CAN |
| 10. Macbeth's target               | — — — — — CAN |
| 11. Roman god                      | — — — — — CAN |
| 12. wartime highway, North America | — — — — — CAN |
| 13. nut                            | — — — — — CAN |
| 14. Latin poet ("Pharsalia")       | — — — — — CAN |
| 15. scrutinize                     | — — — — — CAN |

# In a Topsy-Turvy World, Lunacy Is Truth

## *The Avant-garde Hacks the Hackneyed Into Bizarre New Prisms*

By W. G. ROGERS, whose first book, *"Life Goes On,"* was an experimental novel of the Twenties.

**T**HE PLAY about the bald soprano with no bald soprano in it . . .

The playwright who writes anti-plays . . .

The novelist who doesn't want characters or story in his novels . . .

The novel that keeps beginning over and over again; or, to put it another way, in which all at the same time Caesar invades Gaul, the teacher divorces his wife, the French Revolution takes place, the pupil borrows an eraser, Columbus discovers America, a North African with bandaged head wanders through Paris streets . . .

The dramatist who is against sentences, the dramatist who is against language, the dramatist who names his chief character but can't tell who he is . . .

In a number of recent volumes—among them, *"Degrees,"* by Michel Butor, translated by Richard Howard (Simon & Schuster, \$5.50), *"Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study,"* by Hugh Kenner (Grove, hardcover \$5, paperback \$1.95), and *"The Theatre of the Absurd,"* by Martin Esslin (Doubleday-Anchor, paperback \$1.45)—all this and much more can be found. It is crazy, it is avant-garde, it is often wonderful.

It is on a par with the famous furlined cup; with the recent concert in a London hall where the pianist sat at the piano, never played a note, and was applauded; with the self-destroying art object which a couple of years ago at New York's Museum of Modern Art fell apart, burned up, blew up, and collapsed, one-hoss-shay style.

These strange, even baffling manifestations of the ever-busy human spirit occur not only in literature but all across the creative board. They are seen in paintings, heard in music. Often the creators collaborate: for Apollinaire's *"Les Mamelles de Tirésias"* there is Francis Poulenc's score; for Gertrude Stein's *"Four Saints in Three Acts,"* there is Virgil Thomson's opera; for Stéphane Mallarmé's *"The Afternoon of a Faun,"* there is Debussy's impressionist interpretation.

Mallarmé himself, nearly 100 years

ago, suggested an explanation for the off-beat writers. The first line of his *"Brise Marine"* runs: "The flesh is sad, alas, and I've read every book."

It is a lament for the lack of novelty. Down through the few centuries of the novel's life there had been repeated the same sorts of plots—indeed the same plots—the same pile-up of emotions to the same exploding point, the same human relationships in the same settings with the same gestures and the same incidents. Hugh Kenner says of Samuel Beckett that he wanted to escape the monotony of "people who walk upstairs, walk downstairs, eat eggs, quarrel, marry, converse with clergymen, and ride in the trains."

This restriction of material doesn't apply universally. Indeed, there is a plebeian explicitness about Beckett's own stage directions, as in *"Endgame"*: "He looks up at window left. He turns and looks up at window right. He goes and stands under window right. He looks up at window right," and so on. Beckett would bar this from dialogue. But Michel Butor uses it in his novel *"Degrees"*; to avoid familiar effects, he resorts to familiar means. He describes in detail the life of Parisian school-teachers, their families and pupils. They appear in both depth and width, from inside and from outside, from left and simultaneously from right, like one of Picasso's Janus-type portraits. Butor is perhaps not so much novelist as computer. He is done with the old Mercator projection, by which character and incident were squared off to fit the page though the method reduced their middles and ridiculously enlarged their extremities.

The books Mallarmé had not read, the plays he had not seen, which were not only written after his death but in his time were not even conceived, come from present experimentalists like Butor, Beckett the novelist and dramatist, and other playwrights discussed in Martin Esslin's sympathetic and probing scrutiny of *"The Theatre of the Absurd"*: Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur

Adamov, Jean Tardieu, Fernando Arrabal, Günter Grass, the American Edward Albee. Since they live in a world that offers no "ultimate certainties," they are rootless, lost, and "absurd."

If Frenchmen predominate in the experimental movement, it is because the liberating, clarifying air of Paris invites the imagination to cut loose and fly high. These authors sometimes work in films, a popular medium not so readily available to their American counterparts. *"Last Year at Marienbad,"* a movie by Alain Robbe-Grillet, recognized chief of the "new wave," currently excites the Paris theatre public; and *"Hiroshima, Mon Amour,"* with scenario by Marguerite Duras, another avant-garde novelist, has been very successful here.

It's easy to make fun of these experimentalists. Kenner believes many critics are unfriendly because they cultivate a reputation for "professional knowingness" and are embarrassed when the new wave washes up so few facts for their benefit.

These writers give us experiences we have not had. Instead of going over old ground again, instead of more walking upstairs, walking down, eating eggs, riding in trains and so on, this is fresh, different, novel, pioneering. Book for book, the new promises more than the old, the unconventional more than the conventional, the untried more than the tried. Old stimuli grow stale; the new novelist works on sensitive areas not previously explored.

Furthermore, to know the avant-garde is to be in the vanguard; or, as Esslin says, today's avant-garde may be tomorrow's mass media. The lesson of the past is relevant. The best-known and most daring experimental magazine in the 1920s was Eugene Jolas's *transition*. It published not only the predictable names, like Stein and Joyce, but also artists who now command immensely wider audiences: Hamilton Basso, Erskine Caldwell, Kay Boyle, James Agee, Robert M. Coates, Elliot Paul, Kathryn Hulme.

There is one final caution. The experimentalist demands more of his reader than the run-of-the-mill author. With Butor, Esslin, and Kenner, we go slow, but we get somewhere—somewhere we haven't been before.

