

Critic Among Friends

"Images of Truth: Remembrances and Criticism," by Glenway Wescott (Harper & Row, 311 pp. \$6), studies six writers whom the author has known, several as intimate friends. Gay Wilson Allen is a biographer and critic by avocation, and by vocation teaches American literature at New York University.

By GAY WILSON ALLEN

THE TITLE of this collection of critical and semi-autobiographical essays comes from Blake: "Everything that is possible to be believed is an image of the truth." But actually Mr. Wescott is less concerned with what is "possible to be believed" than with his own firm convictions, one of which is that "there is a more precise, potent truth in story than in philosophy." His argument is the reverse of Plato's: "In a truthful account of something which has happened, our minds discover, almost without thinking, a kind of knowledge of the world which lies deeper and is less subject to perversion and change than all the rules of ethics cut and dried. The emotion of a story has a more pacifying, fortifying effect on our wild hearts than any amount of preaching and teaching."

For some years middlebrow critics have been pleading for literary criticism based on personal delight, outright enthusiasm, instead of cold, intellectual analyses of structures, symbols, images, textures, etc. Here are six literary studies (of Katherine Anne Porter, Somerset Maugham, Colette, Isak Dinesen, Thomas Mann, and Thornton Wilder) which are based on subjective experience and expressed with uninhibited candor. This "old-fashioned" critic not only uses biography where it can lead to appreciative understanding, but he also draws upon his personal knowledge and varying degrees of friendship (in descending intimacy: with Porter, Maugham, Wilder, Colette).

Isak Dinesen is only rather casually known to Mr. Wescott, and his chapter on her does not show many new insights, but it does convey something of the bewitching charm of the Danish author and her tales. The essay on Katherine Anne Porter is so extrava-

gantly adulatory that one is tempted to discount the praise of her work, but by tracing in considerable detail the background of "Ship of Fools" it reveals more clearly the novel itself than anything else I have read on the subject.

The essay on Maugham may also serve as a useful corrective to the present critical fashion of undercutting his reputation. As Mr. Wescott points out, Maugham is "the one of all his generation the least like a genius, the one most emphatically disavowing any such pretensions." Too many critics

have taken him at his own valuation.

Mr. Wescott believes that few novels of the twentieth century contain so much ethics, religion, and psychology of creative endeavor as Maugham's. As an example he cites "Christmas Holiday," published in 1939, which showed "the end of the great lull in modern history: the moment of awakening from the sweetest, most heedless sleep humanity has indulged in! . . . explains more of the human bases of fascism and nazism and communism than anyone else has done . . ."

Although Mr. Wescott is well aware that a novel must give pleasure if it is to have many readers, he does not regard entertainment as a worthy objective of the novelist. For his own part, when he reads for amusement he chooses a fairy story, "Arabian Nights," or one of Isak Dinesen's stories. With Samuel Johnson he agrees that "the

BEWARE OF THE BOOJUM: Lewis Carroll's nonsense stories and poems, written to amuse his child friends, continue to be subjected to a variety of allegorical interpretations for adults only. Martin Gardner, in *"The Annotated Snark"* (Simon & Schuster, \$3.95), sees the "Agony in Eight Fits" as an expression of existentialist despair and even an unintentional prophecy of the Bomb. Along with Gardner's ingenious explication, the book contains the complete poem together with Henry Holliday's original illustrations.



only end of writing is to enable readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it." In fact, one of the chief uses of fiction is "diagnosis: and once in a while, when some class or profession or family of mankind has been spiritually sick, novels have prescribed something to relieve or cure the sickness." But the novelist must show what is wrong without too obviously prescribing. Mr. Wescott thinks that Somerset Maugham does this admirably, and Mr. Maugham agrees that it is in the back of his mind, but he wants the discovery to be the reader's own: "It is not the business of the novelist to tell his readers what they are to think of his characters and his plot."

Many readers have thought that few novels of the twentieth century have more convincingly shown the sickness of an age than Mann's "The Magic Mountain," and Mr. Wescott would agree; yet he regards this novel as overblown, too stuffed with philosophy and abstractions. To this reviewer the chapter on Mann is the weakest in the book, though it does contain some highly original speculations on Mann's political development. Perhaps Mr. Wescott simply has a natural antipathy to Mann, and an affinity for Thornton Wilder, whose view of the novelist's function he shares in general. Wilder would like to regard the novelist as what the Germans call a "*Menschenkenner*," the complete knower of human experience, "like a great eye above the roof, above the town, above the planet, from which nothing is hid."

And yet since Henry James, or rather beginning with him, the novelist has steadily retreated from omniscience. Wilder blames Freud and sociology, but Wescott thinks there are also other contributing factors that have enfeebled the novelists. One is journalism, which today performs the functions of Balzac. Another is the influence of Flaubert, resulting in a cult of stylistic perfectionism. And the economic status of the novelist is poor.

But a major difficulty is increasing cosmopolitanism and social mobility. The nineteenth-century novelist lived in a compact society, was "saturated" with his material, and knew his homogeneous readers. However, "this is a challenge, not an impediment, a problem of form and technique, soluble surely." This book contains a number of suggestions as to how the problem could be solved, but this is not its subject. Its main purpose is the sharing of literary experience, growing out of knowledge of the lives of the creators of the books discussed, and this Glenway Wescott has interestingly and provocatively done.

On Uncovering Travesty

"The Anatomy of Satire," by Gilbert Highet (Princeton University Press. 301 pp. \$5), *combing the classics, distinguishes irony from parody, mimicry, hoax, and romance. Richard G. Stern's third novel, "In Any Case," was published last month. He is visiting lecturer this year at the University of Venice.*

By RICHARD G. STERN

EIGHT FORTY-FIVE. The first portion of the rebroadcast Boston Symphony Concert has been consumed. The station's intermission feature is announced, and Chicago's finest fingers zoom for the switch-off. Not mine. I wait happily for the slow, Glasgow-burred elegance of his "Gud eevning, ladis and gentlm," and the twelve-minute exposition on the week's book, person, or tradition. In the middle of Martin's Forty-fourth Symphony I am still relishing phrases, making lists of books to read, anticipating next week's twelve minutes.

Gilbert Highet. Our Saintsbury. May there always be one, an Edinburgh or Glasgow hound of print, and a scribbler thereof. Can any man have lived long enough to have read what George Saintsbury and Gilbert Highet have read? Mr. Highet has already read more than Mr. Saintsbury, or at least he reads more carefully and completely. He not only reads Abraham a Sancta Clara and sees his resemblance to Bion

of Borysthenes, but he can offer us "a sound, though rather unsympathetic, portrait of Abraham in c. 2 of R. A. Kann's 'Study in Austrian Intellectual History' (New York, 1960)." Mr. Saintsbury might not have read R. A. Kann, and we would have suspected his comparison of Abraham and Bion. One does not suspect Mr. Highet's reading. When one occasionally trips up on something recognizable in his pages, one may say, "That is not what Abraham of Sancta Clara meant at all," but one knows that Mr. Highet has read Abraham, has seen something which sent him to fourteen comparative bell ropes, and then has sounded the bells as truly as his rigorous Scots wit and Chesterfieldian sentences permit.

Mr. Highet would be a hard man with whom to argue. Saints pity the man who wrestles him in the classical pit. Mr. Highet can really shiver with pain at the Syriac thinness of Lucian's Greek, and with bliss at the prose of Apuleius, "as scented and as sinuous as a magic spell"; masterfully, if respectfully, he can dispute scholarly derivations of Seneca's "*Apocolocyntosis*"; and, as for parallel-drawing, who else but he could find Ennius in Bob Newhart, Juvenal in Ruskin's description of the Thames Embankment or, rather, Ruskin in Juvenal when "I was last rereading Juvenal's satire on the horrors of the big city?"

What is the container of this lovely *minestrone*, the *lanx* of this *satura*? A book on satire, happily enough, that most boldly ravished of critical terms, that mask for critical incompetence. Some years ago Mr. Highet wrote his "Juvenal the Satirist," and he obviously knew his way around the country then. By now he can distinguish satire in and from parody, mimicry, hoax, and romance, can spot its misuse in "Bouvard and Pecuchet," its blooms in Rabelais, Swift, Quevedo, More, Erasmus, Julian, Mayakovsky, Ionesco, its presence in history, biography, or narrative where lesser men (cf. Jérôme Carcopino on Petronius's "*Satyricon*") have mistaken it for honest description.

Surely this is enough to ask of a man who can also send us book-loving ignoramuses to the "*Epistulae Obscurorum Virorum*" and Parini's "*Il Giorno*," who remembers wonderful turns of



—From the book.

Reynard the Fox honored by King Lion.