

are in the truest sense married to them. His harmony and counter-point never obtrude ; each detail must be seen in relation to the whole. His best work is all infused with the quality of a first-rate individuality. As Hopkins said :

‘ It is the forged feature finds me ; it is the rehearsal  
Of own, of abrupt self there so thrusts on, so throngs the ear.’

BRUCE PATTISON.

## NEW ENGLAND CULTURE

*THE FLOWERING OF NEW ENGLAND : A Literary History, 1815-1865, by Van Wyck Brooks (J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 15/- net).*

‘ The Civil War brought to a head, however inconclusively, a phase of American culture that later times described as the New England “ renaissance ” . . . Whether this impulse was a “ renaissance ” or only an “ Indian summer,” as Mr. Santayana has called it, “ a golden age,” or a “ golden day,” the impulse existed and the movement was real. The question is only one of its general meaning and of what it signified in itself.’

Although Mr. Brooks begins his last chapter by these sentences, with which everyone can agree, it does seem that questions of ‘ general meaning ’ and of ‘ what it signified in itself ’ are exactly what the rest of the book lacks, however entertaining and complete it may be, and that it certainly is ; the fact is the more surprising because in his earlier *Ordeal of Mark Twain* he employed general ideas, about the function of humour, for instance, or the effects of a dilute Puritan tradition upon a writer, in such a way as really to throw new light on the subject. In dealing with New England, however, he goes along the usual highway, though more charming and more thorough than most, and leaves one with the feeling that there was a very large proportion of mere fondness in the combustible mixture which propelled him. After the passage quoted above he brings in Spengler’s theory of inevitable rise and fall, as an ‘ explanation ’ of the culture he is talking about, and although it probably fits, the garment does not seem a very interest-

ing one. The general effect of his presentation is tacitly to exaggerate the achievements of New England, especially the literary ones, and also, although the facts are there, in great but not ungainly variety, Mr. Brooks himself does not go into the questions which they pose.

He takes the year 1815, when the second war with Great Britain was concluded, as the starting point of the 'impulse,' and has three or four very good chapters about the temper of New England at that time, giving special emphasis to those more liberal aspects of its life which are not commonly known. The region, to begin with, was wealthy; an increasing number of factories were replacing the shipping trade which had been ruined during the war; farming was apparently profitable; and despite the inequalities, wealth—or at least decent means—were fairly widely distributed, so that one could say with some justice that a man was poor only through his own fault. There seems to have been a certain leaven of the more expansive type of eighteenth century gentleman, 'flushed with wine and generosity,' with a taste for elegant living, while there was another strain of the 'lean, shrewd, nervous Yankee type, cautious, with a turn for metaphysics, dried by the American atmosphere.' Whatever the degree of floridity, however, the old Puritan days of Cotton Mather had been forgotten for a long time in the towns, and in the 'mansion houses' throughout the countryside; the relaxation is typified by the change from Calvinism to Unitarianism (called 'the Boston religion') and the consequent displacement of the fire-and-brimstone sermon by one dealing melodiously with the interests of daily life. The most popular preacher in Boston once said of Milton that his eyes had been 'quenched in the service of a vulgar and usurping faction.' 'The vandal spirit of Puritanism' was a common expression.

Respect for principle and conscience, of course, was carried over, but it now found its expression in the 'principles' of Dr. Johnson and Burke, who together with Plutarch and Pope (the *Homer*) were standard reading, and to a lesser extent Fielding and Smollett as well. Blackstone was much in evidence, for the merchants and manufacturers were of course conservative, and found him a convenient 'arsenal of logic against the Jacobins and their bob-tailed crew.' Conscience and principle had not only

a modifying influence upon the pursuit of wealth, so that, as Dickens said, the golden calf worshipped in Boston was 'a mere pygmy' in comparison with that of other parts, but also these qualities constituted a part of the bond of sympathy which existed between town and country ; for despite the greater sombreness of the outlying districts, whose people had held to Calvinism and were still nourished on *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Lives of the Martyrs*, they were none the less on fairly comfortable speaking terms with the urban elements, at least down to the eve of the Civil War, when they divided over the question of Abolition, the townsmen opposing it because of their dependence on a supply of Southern cotton while the country folk turned their practiced Puritan fire to its support. Mr. Brooks is careful to emphasize the aplomb of the American of that day in his dealings with foreigners ; imitative in literature, the American was sure of himself and of his values in every other respect ; the scholar Ticknor, in Rome during his triumphal Grand Tour, 'might have joined six cardinals at whist, if a Boston man could have played on a Sunday evening.'

With the confidence which came of having gone so far in practical and moral matters the New Englanders were now ready to cultivate themselves. W. E. Channing 'ceaselessly preached the gospel of self-improvement. 'We want minds,' he said, 'to be formed among us. We want the human intellect to do its utmost here.' ' They were consciously and specifically out to have a culture as good as any of the historical models : it is a curious phenomenon and probably unique to New England ; it certainly had its effect on the result. The pursuit of culture was, naturally, undertaken with the same means that had already worked so well in other spheres—will, conscientiousness, and industry—and directed by their own aptitudes as well as by the prevailing interest of Europe at that time, they turned to scholarship as the proper beginning. Ticknor returned from his trip with one of the largest private libraries then known and set to work to revivify Harvard College. Results were rapid and astounding ; learning became everyone's right and duty, respected by wealthy and humble alike. Girls in the textile factories knew *Paradise Lost* by heart and went to German classes ; the Harvard hall-porter could quote Virgil by the page ; people told stories of prowess in learning just as

lumber-jacks would relate feats of strength. After having conquered the usual languages one went on to Coptic, Chaldaic or Ethiopic. One effect of all this erudition was to prepare a public for the well-documented historians who were soon to appear, notably Prescott and Motley, and to turn the attention of lesser literary talents to the writing of history, for which excellent libraries existed as well as the market. But the aridity of most of it—Mr. Brooks does not seem much struck by it despite his own evidence—was extraordinary. There seemed to be nothing going on beneath the learned surface. The same discipline and strength of will which enabled the whole country to become so erudite in the space of ten years or less, quashed any transforming originality. Mr. Brooks speaks of the learning of Florence at the beginning of the Renaissance ; but learning for the Florentines served not only to illuminate and define their own nature, in that nature also were vital needs which transmuted the learning into something new. Perhaps New England succeeded too well in doing what she set out to do, to have a culture, poets, historians and the rest, who would be as good (more or less) as any to be found. But it is difficult to speak of the 'originality' of such a culture ; there were variations of detail but the resemblances are more striking, and New England, in her heyday, appears as one of the contributory centres, along with Edinburgh and to some extent London, of a particular type of cultural development ; and after discussing the internal peculiarities of New England it is to that development, which was common to most of Europe for that matter, that one must look to in order to answer the larger questions of 'general meaning.'

The literary tradition had changed, of course, paralleling Europe and England, before Boston saw her brightest day of esteem, when Longfellow was read all over the world and when Emerson and Carlyle were exchanging visits ; for the influence of Burke and Dr. Johnson soon gave way to that of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Goethe, Carlyle. But the essential temper of mind was not much changed, the spirit of emulation, the desire for 'improvement,' the unrelaxing effort. Here and there people were beginning to realize that something was wrong, Emerson for instance, to realize that the intellect and the will had got to be like a loom running without cotton. Margaret Fuller, who made the

most penetrating remarks of all (although curiously enough she preserved her belief in man's ability to make himself into anything he wanted, even if that should be a Correggio), said of Emerson that 'he raised himself too early to the perpendicular and did not lie along the ground long enough.' As for all the lecturing and studying she remarked, 'The superficial diffusion of knowledge, unless attended by a corresponding deepening of its sources, is likely to vulgarize rather than raise the thought of a nation, depriving it of another sort of education through sentiments of reverence, and leading the multitude to believe themselves capable of judging what they but dimly discern . . .'

When Mr. Brooks comes to deal with the outstanding literary figures, his method, which is not literary criticism in the usual contemporary sense, but rather a reconstruction of the moods and aims of the articulate part of society ('literary history,' in short, just what he calls it), full of the charm of their particular existences, is satisfactory in just the degree that their lives and personalities are more interesting than any book they may have written, which is probably true of most of them, of Lowell, of Longfellow and Dr. Holmes (Mr. Brooks has an excellent chapter about the fundamental uncertainties of Lowell), although less true of Thoreau, and still less again of Hawthorne; Hawthorne, who was not much taken with self-improvement and reformism, and who was almost alone in using folk-legends and deep-set folk attitudes in an imaginative fashion, deserves a more penetrating and elaborate treatment than Mr. Brooks supplies.

The charm of New England life, which he conveys so well, and which presumably led him to write this book, is real indeed, and particularly refreshing to people living in a harsher commercial environment, for whom its journals and letters and essays will always make pleasant reading. It is interesting to see that the charm was sentimentalized and exploited by one 'Ike Marvel' even before the Civil War, for the benefit of the rapidly growing business class.

One is forced to admit, however, that the literary achievements were slender. Mr. Brooks' own reaction is to minimize the fact by sliding off at a tangent, emphasizing the charm, the peace of mind and idealism of his personages. Some reasons for the slenderness have already been given or implied: the limitation

of the material to simple country pleasures, to Indian legends, to exhortations towards 'improvement,' arising from the limits which had been set to the New England mind at an earlier period and which had persisted ; the desire for a culture at any price, which tended to discourage criticism of American products, was also a factor ; literary expression tended to become watery even within the original limits ; Mr. Brooks admits that Emerson, despite his sound intuitions about poetry of an earlier period, was a bad or indulgent judge of the verse of his contemporaries. Lastly, although the exact degree of English influence upon the literary tradition of New England can always be argued, it is true that there was such an influence, doubtless aided by similarities of temperament, of language and of circumstance, and it can hardly be said that New England threw off the general limitations which prevailed on the other side of the Atlantic.

What one comes to ultimately, in thinking of the 'general meaning' of New England is the fundamental problem of nineteenth century culture, a problem which was posed by the *philosophes* of the preceding century when they, rationalizing the tendencies which had in turn preceded them, defined man as essentially an individual, who would at most consent to limit himself by a voluntary *contrat social*. He was free to develop himself as he chose and he was free to 'improve.' But the questions which were never answered, and indeed never asked, were what man's basic interests consisted of, and of what sort of stable 'improvement' he was capable. While the moralists of the nineteenth century went on urging improvement in the direction of knowledge and increased moral scruple, the rest of mankind, and unfortunately the majority, answered the question of their interests in a different fashion, turning to physical comfort, increased production, the excitement of competitive success. The modern business man still defends himself in the same words, citing his 'right to individual initiative.'

No one could deny the admirable qualities of various individuals, the learned artisans, the conscientious lecturers and the rest, whether in America or England, but the kind of effort they were making does seem to contain blindnesses which bring them into the blame for the final disintegration. Holding a most rarified conception of human nature, and at a time when external

religious sanctions had as good as disappeared, they believed that men would restrain themselves for the benefit of society as a whole. One may argue that the movement into the West and into commercial enterprises (which spelled the end of the old New England culture) was inevitable under any circumstances ; the geography of America, in short, was too tempting. But the stability of the culture seems to have been amazingly slight ; in fact it would be impossible to imagine one which offered less resistance to disrupting forces. The very dissemination of knowledge, in a society which relied on such strict control and consciousness and which thus buried the sources of experience, had the opposite effect from the one intended ; for as Margaret Fuller said, 'the tendency of circumstances has been to make our people superficial, irreverent and more anxious to get a living than to live mentally and morally.' Like Emerson, the whole effort seemed to have risen too soon from the ground.

The restrictions were being relaxed, of course, to which end Emerson, Dr. Holmes and others argued, but while this slow process was going on the impatient majority were finding immediate satisfactions (or thinking they would at least) in the adventure of a commercial or a pioneering career, where the brake of the old aims and principles was rapidly worn down to nothing or turned into compromises and sentimentalities.

There is no better place to observe the beginning of the social split, between the practical people and the others, than in New England during the years about which Mr. Brooks writes. The adequate comment on the situation (not only in New England but in its parallels elsewhere) does not seem to be to look merely at the fineness and integrity of certain individuals, nor to look at the charm of the whole culture, while shutting one's eyes to its precariousness and its short life. The whole impulse or development ought to have lessons for educational theory ; Mr. Brooks supplies an excellent source—if not a guide—for its study.

DONALD CULVER.

## A FRENCH CRITIC

*HISTOIRE DE LA LITTÉRATURE FRANÇAISE DE 1789 A NOS JOURS*, by Albert Thibaudet (*Librairie Stock, Paris*).

Until his death in 1936 Albert Thibaudet held, as critic and historian of French literature, a place which one felt to be unique though not easy to define. Like Amiel, one of his multifarious interests, Thibaudet lectured in the university of Geneva, but in a different age. Since the time of Brunetière, and before him since Taine, Frenchmen who have professed literature have been almost exclusively preoccupied with history, evolution, movements, developments ; with a ' scientific ' approach to ideological content at the expense of judgment ; with the rigorous separation of ingredients to the neglect of synthesis ; above all with the relations between works—sources, influences, comparisons, *confrontations*—rather than with the works themselves as literature. There have been sound textual critics among them ; but few, if any, have been concerned with taste.

Who, moreover, among Frenchmen of the nineteenth century, or so far of the twentieth, could qualify strictly as a literary critic? The genius of the nineteenth century in France as in England lay definitely in Irrelevance. Sainte-Beuve, for instance, was as sensitive as any of us are to the encroachments of philosophy and science ; but the thing for him was the man not the book. For the modern university critic the thing is not the book or the man but the background.

Albert Thibaudet, as we have known him chiefly through his regular contributions to the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (often the best pages in that declining periodical, though themselves unequal in value) did not conform to the dominant type of ' literary ' academic. In his attitude and asides one could detect subtle points of irony at its expense. Yet he had obviously an immense, detailed knowledge of history—so much of his country's literature, thought and politics at his finger tips that he juggled gratuitously with coincidences in a fashion that could be damaging to his style and infuriating to the unfortunate reader with no liking for fortuitous or forced or even felicitous concatenations, Rabelaisian enumerations or those local *crus* which it was a hobby of this critic to cultivate and whose inspiration may account for