



*The ROVING CRITIC*  
CARL VAN DOREN



THE RIGHTEOUS NINETIES:— Thomas Beer writes a novel with as much erudition as if it were a history and writes a history with as much concentration as if it were a novel. In "Sandoval" the bad manners of New York's Age of Innocence condition the whole narrative, like the stiff drawing and crude colors of a tapestry. In "The Mauve Decade" (Knopf) the manners of the American nineties are not displayed in an impartial catalogue, but are arranged in an intensely dramatic scheme. The book has a kind of comic villain: the calm self-righteousness of the age. The villain so pervades the scene that the hero may occasionally be lost sight of. Indeed the hero, like the lucky youth in a fairy-tale, wears a cloak of darkness which permits his whereabouts to be guessed only by the worthy mischief that he does to the villain. Yet the book has a hero, and he is the critical spirit which during the nineties was still at such a disadvantage in the United States.

The game of pitting this hero against this villain is perhaps no longer quite a fair one. The hero has greatly increased in strength since 1900, and he is allowed in 1926 to do an amount of worthy mischief which a generation ago he certainly

did not do and at that time hardly perceived the need of doing. It is mischief in retrospect, now accomplished in relative safety because the villain, formerly in power, has had to yield to other self-righteousnesses and himself to grow as laughable as any old fashion. But of course it is not to be expected that this villain and this hero will ever lie down in the sportsmanlike friendliness of the lion and the lamb. In a world in which the lion is so likely to have the last word, every consideration should be given to the lamb on those occasions when he has a good chance to speak out.

The spokesman of the lamb on this occasion is not himself a lamb. Though no American critic has sharper teeth than Mr. Beer, he bites so delicately that his execution is a work of art. Not for him the bludgeon or the bagpipe. In the first chapter of "The Mauve Decade," for example, he moves softly about among the women of the nineties, praised in those days for their lofty moral purposes; but when he has said his say his heroines are slightly less charming than mummies, as closely wrapped in prudish decencies. The decade which romantically canonized the American Girl heedlessly accepted the myth of supernal virtues

in women and by and by found itself in the grip of a bloodless rectitude which insisted on smothering beauty and ecstasy and bred either docile believers or cautious hypocrites. If Frances E. Willard cuts, on the whole, the sorriest figure in "The Mauve Decade," it is not, however, because she was a woman. It is because she was solemnly followed, a Joan of Arc in flat satin ruffles, by hosts of Americans who were "graceless, ascetic, and unimaginative in the sight of God." "She accepted," says Mr. Beer, "a formula and called on God to make it sacred. Her eventual vice was an enlargement of the weak clause, 'Lead us not into temptation,' and the civilization that she foresaw was a sterile meadow, dangerless, sprinkled with folk wearing white ribbons." Self-righteousness sprang up all around her, in politics, religion, racial relationships, economics, criminology, literature, love, and all the other arts and sciences. The villain had his dreadful day and went to any length to crush any conceivable difference of opinion. It is the villain's fault if the hero is merciless now.

Mr. Beer rarely lets himself fall into apparent zeal in his revenges. Laughter is his whip. He has collected as many morsels of imbecility from his decade as Mr. Mencken from a later decade in "Americana," and he keeps them all gracefully suspended in his memory, ready to drop as needed into the narrative. And these morsels come not merely from newspapers; they come from letters and diaries and the formal compositions of the best authors of the nineties, as likewise from the mountains of gossip which Mr. Beer

has heaped up. He does not take the trouble to give chapter and verse. Indeed he has a teasing habit of assuming that all his cryptic allusions will be guessed. The teasing habit is, of course, also flattering. That, as Sarah E. Spoldripper says of Ring Lardner in another connection, is a part of his charm. For example: "Matrons would have been incredulous if they had known that the grand courtesan of New York—hence, of America—was a woman resembling an inferior cook, whose clothes were ordered for her because she had no taste. They saw her; she sometimes appeared on the stage. She was a Christian Scientist and suffered greatly from sciatica. Her charm was an exquisite voice that gave point to her humors, for it was sworn that she invented the phrase 'a stuffed shirt,' meaning a tremendous nobody. Her flat was jammed with facile, clever men when she gave suppers, the jaunty nothings who rolled dice for drinks in the old Metropole, the writers of smart plays, cheap songs, forgotten reviews—pink Acton Davies, Paul Dresser, Clyde Fitch, who always seemed to lead his clothes into a room, and a luckless, charming man whose wife once crawled over the floor of their poor lodging in the pulsing woe of childbirth to open the door and find a messenger with roses and his card: 'With love and loyalty, from Paul.'" This is a joy to any reader who recognizes the unidentified persons of the picture; it is hardly less a joy to readers who tiptoe and strain but do not make the real persons out.

It will be regretted by all who find it impossible to commit the entire

book to memory that Mr. Beer has failed to equip it with an index. That he has not is proof enough that he does not regard "The Mauve Decade" as a book of reference. Rather, it is his drama of the conflict between the enlightened and the self-righteous. It is his criticism of the imperial generation of his country. It is his stinging attack upon the faith of his fathers.



THE FALL OF GREENWICH VILLAGE:—Some burlier historian will some day recount the rise and fall of Greenwich Village on a larger scale than Floyd Dell has employed in his latest book, but "Love in Greenwich Village" (Doran) cannot soon lose its priority among the documents. Of the rise of the Village Mr. Dell has not a great deal to say, except that it rose like a dream—a dream of freedom from conventionality and ugliness in the midst of a conventional and ugly age. His emphasis is chiefly on the fall, and his illustrations in his ten stories and sketches are drawn for the most part from the fate of love and lovers in the first flushed era of the neighborhood. Those lovers, with their vision of a love which could somehow be at once as high as a lyric and as long as an epic, he sees as doomed to certain disappointment. He takes, perhaps, even a philosophical pleasure in showing how one such love after another breaks up under the strokes of adversity which always threaten love's illusion. He is decidedly more moral in his conceptions than Murger, whose "Scènes de la Vie de Bohême" comes naturally to mind. The Bohemians of Mr. Dell do not

frollic with the strong appetites and cheerful carelessness of Murger's. Their consciences are as active as their desires. It may be suspected that this is the case with American Bohemians, and that Mr. Dell's representations are generally correct. The effect of his special emphasis, however, is to give his book an air of sadness and backward-longing which was not the note of the Village in the days herein displayed. Thus the Village has an elegist before it has quite had a dramatist.



GOSSIP AMONG THE CENTAURS:—For something like a quarter of a century observers have been lamenting the passing of the cowboy. There is no hint of lament in Ross Santee's "Men and Horses" (Century), which moves about in the world of cow camps and round-ups as if that world would last forever. Mr. Santee is himself of the breed he writes about. Gossip says that if, after an enervating stay in New York, he finds he cannot sleep with comfort on a bare floor, he goes back instantly to the range. From such an authority not much that is merely idyllic can be expected to come. Nothing much of the sort does come from him. He writes like one who has gone among these centaurs, has heard them talking, and has set down their stories in their own words. Whether he speaks in his own person or in the person of one of his characters makes little difference. The language is easy, colloquial, direct, and, on occasions, jubilantly metaphorical. Some of the stories are of the sort hoarded by the cowboys for the instruction and entertainment of

tenderfeet, but most of them are simple narratives, illustrative of cowboy life and yet not so typical as to lack a personal quality. What makes "Men and Horses" exciting, however, is rather its horses than its men, and the four-legged heroes of the book appear to better advantage in the pictures than in the text. For though Mr. Santee may write better than most amateurs, he draws better than most professionals. There are over a hundred drawings, mostly of horses, and every horse is every inch a horse. Hammer-headed, ewe-necked, rat-tailed, the creatures are presented with a realism which makes the horse of the decorative tradition seem tedious and absurd. But Mr. Santee does not content himself with the piecemeal details of realism. He knows how to catch his horses in positions that are compositions. Shown in action, his beasts are so alive that their motives are as unmistakable as their outlines. And in groups his horses are as natural and varied as any eye ever discovered a group of horses to be.



**EMPTY SKIES:**—American invention first overcame the difficulties of human flight. The American imagination has so far absorbed the idea that an airplane passing overhead is no longer an object of wonder. But American legislation is still hopelessly indifferent to the task of making adequate laws for the use of the air. Except for a few sporadic municipal attempts to regulate the flight of aircraft over cities and some State laws respecting various local aspects of aviation, the law is silent. The federal government has failed to

take the necessary steps. The Civil Aeronautics Act was allowed to die of neglect at the close of the congressional session in 1925. Nothing has been done in this country to meet the international problems involved. The United States still delays becoming a signatory to the International Convention on Air Navigation. If the air were merely another distant frontier, like the West a hundred years ago, its exploration might be left to individual enterprise, and the law might catch up later. But the air is a frontier which comes too close to the settled parts of the country and which needs too much concerted effort and capital to be left to any such loose development. That matters are now almost at a standstill in the United States, both as regards commercial aviation and defense in the air, is due to the fact that the lawmakers refuse to think in the new third dimension and to act accordingly. An able discussion of the situation is given by W. Jefferson Davis in his "Putting Laws Over Wings" (the author), which takes up the academic legal question whether the private owner of land owns it to the sky, and puts the case for federal legislation about the air squarely on its feet. In a nation bubbling over with enthusiasm for passing new laws, it is hardly unreasonable to insist that proper cognizance be taken of one of the most important elements added to human life since the application of steam to mechanical use.



**RAKES:**—The recent alarming vogue of sinners in literature has sent E. Beresford Chancellor scurrying through English fashionable history

from the Restoration to the Regency in search of matter for the six volumes of "The Lives of the Rakes" (Brentano). It is partly the author's fault that his chronicles are no more stirring than they are; he commits unnecessary expurgations, and he writes with a kind of fussy self-consciousness, now apologetic and now swaggering. But the fault lies partly with the subjects of these immoral tales; the English, it seems, have generally been awkward sinners. Though under the Stuarts they showed touches of French audacity and under the first Hanoverians touches of German stupidity, the rakes of that century and a half were on the whole true Britons. At any moment one of them might fall into blubbering repentance. While they were at their peaks of misbehavior they evidently had all the time a lively sense of sin. No rake in the entire line was a philosophical sinner, using his brain to dissolve the common boundaries of conduct. Even the shameless Colonel Charteris was merely an unimaginative obstinate brute. The fourth Duke of Queensberry deliberately chose to sin, but he had no doubt that he was a sinner. Like Coth, the father of Jurgen, "Old Q" doubtless felt in hell that the place was hardly as hot as he deserved. The consequence of all this orthodoxy in the rakes is a certain monotony in their histories. Being men of mode, they were circumscribed in their offenses no less than in their manners. Compared to a Gil Blas, for instance, they look as if they were running in the wheels of squirrel-cages. Not one of them has the genius of a Cellini or the gusto of a Casanova.

Mr. Chancellor might have been as frank and unconcerned about the doings of his rakes as he liked. He could not have made them tempting.

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AN AMERICAN NOTE:—The revival of the "English Men of Letters" series, now edited by J. C. Squire, has led to the production of John Freeman's competent "Herman Melville" (Macmillan). The inclusion of an American author in the series is not so novel a matter as some commentators think. Henry James wrote a "Hawthorne" for it as far back as 1879, and several Americans appear in the supplement to the original issue known as the American Series. The Melville volume, however, once more calls attention to the fact that English critics, when writing on American topics, often go wrong as a result of neglecting American sources of information. For example, Mr. Freeman in his appendix cites "A Leaf from a Manuscript Journal, by J. N. Reynolds," as authority for the tradition that there was a real whale, called Mocha Dick, from which Melville took his villain. The account, says Mr. Freeman, "has been brought to light by Mr. R. S. Garnett, to whom I am indebted for a perusal." But Mr. Freeman need not have been indebted solely to Mr. Garnett. If he had consulted the pages given to Melville in so obvious a work of reference as "The Cambridge History of American Literature" he might have learned that the Reynolds paper was published in the "Knickerbocker Magazine" in May, 1839.

## SHORT CUTS

**Our Times. Volume I: The Turn of the Century.** By Mark Sullivan. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Persons who had not yet begun to look about them by 1905 will find the materials of this work quaint or outlandish. Persons who stopped looking at about that time will weep that the days of 1900-04 are gone, alas! But persons who in 1900 were anywhere from ten to forty, say, and who nevertheless still notice that life has a way of going on without too much loss, will be pleased with every page that Mr. Sullivan has written. This volume is the first of four intended "to follow an average American through this quarter-century of his country's history, to recreate the flow of the days as he saw them, to picture events in terms of their influence on him, his daily life and ultimate destiny." Mr. Sullivan has gone to contemporary newspapers for his sources and has packed his pudding with delicious plums: news, gossip, pictures. There is also a good deal of enlightened analysis.

**The Fugger News-Letters. Second Series.** Edited by Victor von Klarwill. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Newspapers did not exist in 1568-1605, but the great Augsburg merchants, the Fuggers, received from their correspondents everywhere in Europe frequent reports on the events and rumors of the time. The present selection, confined to news-letters dealing with English affairs, gives tempting peeps behind many curtains.

**The Art in Painting.** By Albert C. Barnes. Harcourt, Brace & Co.

It is difficult to imagine a more informed, downright, and expert treatise than is here offered by an American business man, who is also a great collector. The book's most striking quality is the vigor with which it brushes aside irrel-

evance and sentimentality and goes straight to the point.

**Rough Justice.** By C. E. Montague. Doubleday, Page & Co.

An overrated, over-British novel, in which the dull characters turn out to be true heroes, after all. The style would be more valuable if it were more economical.

**Catullus.** Translated by F. A. Wright. E. P. Dutton & Co.

All of the poems are here rendered into English verse, along with part of the wit, a little of the grace, and almost none of the intensity, of the original.

**1825-1925: A Century of Stupendous Progress.** By Joseph McCabe. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Statistical evidence sensibly brought together to prove that we are not so badly off, compared with our great-grandfathers, as Dean Inge and Bertrand Russell would have us think. Science is properly given the credit.

**Nize Baby.** By Milt Gross. George H. Doran Company.

The author, with his ear to the dumb-waiter, reports the domestic conversation of a Jewish apartment-house. The dialect is excruciating.

**The Savoy Operas.** By W. S. Gilbert. Macmillan Company.

Printed, like the most independent classics, on thin paper, in clear type, and without notes, these thirteen librettos exhibit the English language at its lightest and brightest. It is one of the lamentable injustices of nature that Sullivan's music cannot be heard as easily as Gilbert's words can be read.

**Mape: The World of Illusion.** By André Maurois. D. Appleton & Co.

Thinner sap from the tree that gave us "Ariel."