

Drama

The Cult of Violence

MELODRAMA, it is commonly held, owes its character to astute plotting and to moments of intensely heightened conflict. The briefest observation of our stage destroys that theory at once. Our average melodrama is structurally stupid. Its continuance depends on some trick that a clever child could see through. At some crucial moment a false reticence or nobility is feigned and the action rattles ahead for want of three words of explanation that only perversity coupled with dullness could have withheld. There is no nimbleness of invention in these plays. The plots are monotonous and heavy; the final act is, as a rule, openly bankrupt of ingenuity or resourcefulness. Of this fact the audiences are not unaware. It is possible to overhear jesting comments on it from people of no startling intelligence. Yet these people will go again and again, and melodramas are—far beyond farce or sentimental comedy—the safest investments of the commercial managers.

The explanation is not far to seek. It lies in the extreme psychical gregariousness of the average American. Spiritual isolation has no bracing quality for him. To be in a minority makes him feel indecent to the point of nakedness. His highest luxury is the mass enjoyment of a tribal passion. War, hunting, and persecution are the constant diversions of the primitive mind. And these that mind seeks in the gross mimicry of melodrama. Violence, and especially moral violence, is shown forth, and the audience joins vicariously in the pursuits and triumphs of the action. Thus its hot impulses are slaked. It sees itself righteous and erect, and the object of its pursuit, the quarry, discomfited or dead. For the great aim of melodrama is the killing of the villain. Whether he be tribal enemy or moral or social dissenter, he is permitted small successes, shadowy evasions, brief exultations. But these are known to be momentary and felt as rudely ironic. The net tightens, its cords cut closer and closer into the victim's flesh until the magnificent instant of the clicking handcuff or the whirring bullet is ripe.

Stronger and deeper is the final instinct that adds fierceness and joy to the mimic man-hunt of melodrama. The villain, whether tribal enemy, mere foreigner, or rebel against the dominant order, is always represented as an unscrupulous rake. He attacks the honor of native women, and thus—especially if his skin is a tinge darker—there is blended with the other motives of pursuit the motive of a vicarious lynching party of the orthodox kind. The melodrama of this approved pattern brings into vicarious play those forces in human nature that produce mob violence in peace and mass atrocities in war. Nations addicted to physical violence of a directer and simpler kind have cultivated the arena and the bull ring. Those who desire their impulses of cruelty to seem the fruit of moral energy substitute melodrama.

It should be emphasized that the motives of these plays are constant in character. They return in each season and in many superficially different forms. A group of last year's melodramas would illustrate them no worse and no better than the group that holds our stages today. The variations are flimsy; the foundation is one. There is Mr. Elmer A. Rice's "For the Defense" (The Playhouse). Its villain is a Hindoo physician, not a "white man." His consulting room reeks with incense, champagne, and subtlety. He tries to ensnare young women. A splendid young district attorney who cannot speak any foreign "lingo"—"straight American" is good enough—pursues him. The "heathen dog" (as another Hindoo was called last year in a similar play) is shot. There is Mr. Channing Pollock's "The Sign on the Door" (The Republic Theatre). It is simpler. The villain is an American, though of French descent. He has had an affair with a married woman. He "took advantage" of her when she was "lonesome." An irate and sturdy husband, who

divides women into "good cattle" and "bad cattle," shoots him and will of course not even be tried. This piece admirably illustrates the sex morality of melodrama: women are devoid of will and hence of all moral responsibility. They are apt, poor dears, to long for change and companionship. But whoever yields to their amiable weakness must be shot at once. In "The Whirlwind" (The Standard Theatre) an evil Mexican pursues the heroine. His intentions, as a matter of fact, are quite honorable according to the code of melodrama. But an American loves Chiquita. Hence the "greaser" must be the villain. He is refused at the altar; his estates are confiscated. The pure, dauntless American hero rides off with the Indian maiden. These three plays are pure examples of the melodrama of self-glorification, pursuit, and moral violence. Miss Rita Weiman's "The Acquittal" (The Cohan and Harris Theatre) is more ingenious in method and cooler in temper. It has more the effect of having been written, less that of having been dictated through a megaphone. The villain's crime is for once both credible and detestable. But the author had her finger on the moral pulse of her audience when she counted upon its passionate approval of his defeat and disgrace not primarily because he had murdered a good man for money, but because he had not kept his marriage vows. That fact illustrates pointedly the infinitely curious psychology of the audience. The dramatic critic can only set it down. The student of society should find it of extraordinary significance.

Finally there is "The Purple Mask" (The Booth Theatre). It, too, is a melodrama. But it is adapted from the French. It is not American at all, and we are at once in another world. Not merely in another world of costumes and manners. That would matter little. But in another universe of the moral life. There is neither rancor nor ferocity. Bonapartists and royalists have gaiety and gallantry and humanity. The royalist gentleman, as befits a romantic melodrama, is the hero and achieves his little triumph. But no one is hated or hounded or shot. Citizen Brisquet is a worthy opponent of the Comte de Trevières and the plume of neither is in the dust. It is all trivial enough. The bravery is thin and brittle. The glossy silks are sham and the flashing swords are of tin. One remembers the elder Dumas, but the play will not bear the comparison. And so one rather regrets that Mr. Leo Ditrichstein must spend his fine gifts—his suavity, his mellow pathos, his unfailing personal magnetism—on such ephemeral effects. But one can see the play without inner shame, without the consciousness of having witnessed a brutality that stains the mind. Such a consciousness is nearly always with one in the presence of our native melodramas.

LUDWIG LEWISOHN

Historians and Political Scientists at Cleveland

NEITHER the American Historical Association nor the American Political Science Association, both of which organizations, reconvening after an interval of two years, held their annual meetings at Cleveland December 27-January 1, allowed the war to overshadow entirely the other interests with which they have long been severally concerned. The American Historical Association, with which was also joined the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, devoted special sessions to ancient history, the history of the Mississippi Valley region, American economic history, Hispanic-American and European history, and American colonial history, in addition to two sessions dealing with agricultural history and a conference on history and education for citizenship in the schools. A conference on the history of science, presided over by Professor George L. Burr, of Cornell, was an interesting new departure. The program of the Political Science Association, in addition to war topics, offered sessions on recent State Constitutions, budgetary reform (a joint meeting with the National Municipal League), and national administration.

It was inevitable, however, that topics bearing upon the war should be the more numerous and serve to awaken the larger interest. It cannot in justice be said that the war papers of the Historical Association program, taken as a whole, were of a high order, or that they forecast conclusively that scientific detachment and all-round view which the future American historian of the war ought, one might suppose, preëminently to take. The presidential address of Mr. William Roscoe Thayer was an unimportant threshing over of the old straw of German errors and offenses, and was negligible as a refutation of the "fallacies in history" which it ostensibly discussed. Professor Charles H. Haskins, of Harvard, in a paper on the Franco-German frontier, offered a complacent justification of the treatment of the Rhine and the Saar Valley by the Peace Conference, only to have the inconclusiveness of his presentation deftly pointed out by Mr. Alexander F. Whyte, M. P., of London, in a few witty strokes. Professor Robert H. Lord, of Harvard, who acted as an expert on Poland for the American peace delegation at Paris, was also a disappointment, his paper on the new Poland being compounded far more of optimistic recital and generalization than of facts such as the assembled historians were eager to know.

The Political Science Association was more fortunate. The presidential address of Professor Henry Jones Ford, of Princeton, on "Present Tendencies in American Politics," was a searching discussion of political changes and developments which have deprived American government of much of its representative character and have aggregated political power in the hands of officials and agencies which in practice are largely irresponsible. The centralizing tendencies which have produced in this country a mixture of oligarchy and autocracy instead of democracy are not to be checked, least of all eradicated, either by amending the Constitution or by improving Federal administration. It is the constitutional system, not merely its working under the conditions of party politics, that has proved defective; and where the system is at fault the only remedy is a new scheme. Professor Ford's able address, which it is to be hoped will reach a wider public than the membership of the Association affords, can hardly fail to strengthen the demand for a Federal Constitutional convention which is more and more being heard.

Two or three other papers on the program of the Political Science Association call for special comment. A paper by Professor Philip M. Brown, of Princeton, on the New Balkans of Central Europe, with special reference to Hungary, was a stinging arraignment of the Peace Conference for its blind and unprincipled treatment of the Balkan peoples, and a striking exposition of the political and racial conditions which seem destined to make the Balkans a region of war rather than of peace for years to come. Mr. Jerome Landfield, a member of the Russian Economic League at New York, gave a commendably clear account of the Russian revolution of November, 1917, although his acceptance of the Sisson documents and his apparent confidence in certain alleged new proofs of German intrigue at the time left a good deal to be desired. The outlines of a future Russian Constitution as seen by Russian liberals, embodying, apparently, most of the virtues of the British and American systems with few of their defects, were sketched by Baron S. A. Korff. Finally, Professor W. W. Willoughby, of Johns Hopkins, in an informal but able statement, summarized the political situation in the Far East with particular reference to China and Japan and the interests of Europe and the United States, in the course of which the conduct of Japan came in for severe handling. One could not but wish that, for the sake of historical completeness, the growing anti-imperialist sentiment in Japan might have received more adequate recognition.

The American Historical Association, long known for its many scholarly activities, continues most of its undertakings as before; the functions of the Public Archives Commission, however, are to be suspended for a year, pending, apparently, the virtual discontinuance of the Commission now that its work is

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