

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

VOLUME II

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1925

NUMBER 11

City and Country

THE rural denizen, at the beginning of the annual summer incursion, used often to lean on the top rail of the fence and sniff "City folks!" at approaching boarders. There was a latent contempt in his remark. "City folks" dressed weirdly and talked a curious language of their own. They flaunted a culture difficult to comprehend. To the eye of the farmer they were concerned with a thousand foolishnesses that they took quite seriously. They never seemed really to know where they were at. And the rural denizen prided himself upon the fact that he, in his own daily toil, was concerned with the few fundamental facts of life that really mattered. Hence "city folks", with all their highfalutin' ways, were a matter of mystery and no little amusement to him.

There has always been enough truth in the viewpoint of the rural denizen to balance the truth that large cities provide remarkable educational and cultural opportunities and that life within them confers many benefits. Of course it is in human nature for the inhabitants of large cities to think that the rest of the world must revolve around their own particular town. This is noticeably so in New York. And, as has been frequently and truly said, the New York viewpoint is often extremely provincial for that very reason.

Recently New York has come rather to fancy itself as a "hub of culture". And, even as of old there were the much caricatured "city folks", with their artificialities and fripperies, who provided amusement for the provinces,—so today there is a growing class of what may, for lack of a better term, be labelled "city books", books that cause quite a flurry of comment in Manhattan but penetrate the rest of the country scarcely at all. New Yorkers who pride themselves on keeping abreast of literature have always three or four titles of books about which to rattle glibly enough. They are among the "latest" books, of course. They are "so clever" or "so brilliant" or so what-not. A knowledge of them is essential to the smartest table-talk. And they remain almost entirely for urban and suburban consumption.

Meanwhile the provinces go on stodgily reading those best-sellers that we ourselves find so dull and in which they perceive the simple elements they can understand. They are the unsophisticates and they turn to the unsophisticated. And probably they have come to pride themselves upon their sturdy attitude toward "city books", even as they used to regard it as stalwart to deride the foolishnesses of "city folks".



Whose side are we taking? We are not taking either side. The City reads its own particular kind of trash and the Country ruminates its own particular brand of rubbish. The average reading either of City or Country is subject to many criticisms, even if, in each case, these criticisms are not the same. The City contains more sophisticates bored by simple annals. And yet, in the present Day of Grace we should find it harder to corroborate that statement than formerly. Sales of certain books quite certainly sophisticated and quite certainly of high artistic merit point to widespread distribution. The Country, in other words, is beginning to look into what the City reads. No longer is it merely content to gibe. And, by the same token, we have seen signs of late of metropolitan critics taking quite seriously certain of the Country's favorite authors, or, at least, examining

The Leavetaking

By EDWARD DAVISON

THE sun goes down beyond the purple fell,
A wind has blown the lark into a cloud,
One backward look will serve to say fare-
well

To the dark valley that my fathers ploughed.

The house they built is empty. I must go
Over the twilight moorland till I find
The breast of eve, where I may learn to know
What thing it is that gives men peace of mind.

The last light trembles in the farther air;
This is the night, the hour I dare not lose:
A hand has beckoned me, I know not where,
A voice has spoken, but I know not whose.

Tohu and Bohu

By ELMER DAVIS

IF you believe the textbook on geology prescribed for the schools of Tennessee, the earth prior to nine o'clock in the morning of September 21, 4004 B.C., was without form and void. If you believe T.S. Eliot, William Gerhardt, Aldous Huxley, Rose Macaulay, and numerous other highly esteemed writers of these times, it is still, or perhaps again. Life is meaningless, effort is futile, the perceptible phenomena of existence have no interrelation; all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

I am far from denying it. I do not pretend to discern any unifying or arranging principle in the data of experience, and while in my quality of member of the human race I am depressed by the thought that after 5,929 years we have got nowhere except back to the starting point, I hope I do not allow the local patriotism of a resident of this planet to blind me to the facts. I merely argue that if life is without form and void, it does not necessarily follow that the novels that mirror life must also be without form and void.

Why not? Well, suppose life is chaos—full of sound and fury, as Miss Rose Macaulay tells us, signifying nothing. Whatever life may be, two dollars is two dollars. At this writing two dollars will buy a current novel or a quart of passable kitchen-stove gin. And persons who live by selling the books they write are obviously interested in persuading the customers to spend their two dollarses for a novel rather than for gin. The manufacturing novelist starts this commercial competition with one great advantage over the bootlegger—he knows, as a rule, the charms of the rival attraction. He knows what the consumer gets out of gin. How, then, is he to persuade him to buy a novel instead? Obviously by meeting the needs of the trade; and because they fail to do this novelists of the Chaotic School are working infinite harm to the interest of the industry at large.

What are the needs of the trade? What does the average citizen want when he has perceived that life in the chaotic earth is without meaning? The answer is, of course, gin. Nothing can be done to give life any sense at all he wants to buy gin. He wants something which will give him a sense of order, even fictitious order; a meaning which he can enjoy even though he knows, or will know when he sobers up, that this meaning is wholly artificial. He wants to see life as an arrangement of some symmetry and significance, with himself occupying a dignified position in that arrangement. He can get exactly this gratification if he spends his two dollars for gin, but it becomes increasingly difficult for him to get it out of the contemporary novel.

And it is the novelists who perceive the pointlessness of life most clearly who most stubbornly refuse to give the customers any relief. As a working novelist who would have to work at some less agreeable trade if nobody bought novels, I resent a book like Mr. Gerhardt's "Polyglots" as treason to the working class. It is a deadly blow at the goose that lays the golden eggs. If the customers on whom Mr. Gerhardt and I depend for our living are going to find in fiction only the futility and chaos that they have already found, and must keep on finding, in life, they will spend their money for gin, and get from gin the illusion that art was once supposed to furnish.

This Week



"Dark Laughter." Reviewed by *Henry Seidel Canby*.

"The Kenworthys." Reviewed by *Allan Nevins*.

"Bread Givers." Reviewed by *Johan J. Smertenko*.

"Colin II," and "Coral." Reviewed by *H. W. Boynton*.

"Advertising Elements and Principles." Reviewed by *Ernest Elmo Calkins*.

"Rarebit." By *Wilson Follett*.

The Bowling Green. By *Christopher Morley*.

"America and World Peace." Reviewed by *Hamilton Holt*.

"The Rural Home." Reviewed by the late *Herbert Quick*.

Two Books on the Orient. Reviewed by *Sydney Greenbie*.

Next Week

Fall Book Number

Published by Time Incorporated,
Publishers of TIME,
The Weekly News-Magazine

them with a certain respect they felt due the choice of the multitude.

It will be a long time, of course, before the really yokelish mind looks upon cultivation as anything more than sheer snobbery and "putting on airs". And it will be some time before the type at the opposite extreme, the rather cheap "city feller", sees anything but "hick stuff" in a straightforward story written, perhaps, with an admirable simplicity. But in between these types, these living and breathing caricatures, the general public—in City or Country—is developing discrimination and an appreciation of each domain's literary standards.

Of course Literature has nothing to do either
(Continued on page 192)

I speak as a consumer, quite as much as a producer. In the past year I have read perhaps eighty novels. Out of four of them I got my money's worth, or more. (If their identity is relevant to the argument, they were "The Constant Nymph," "Some Do Not," "Arrowsmith," and "Mrs. Mason's Daughters," in the order given.) Perhaps half a dozen others were worth the time spent in reading them. As for the rest, the money they cost me at the circulating library would have bought almost a case of gin; and the gin would have veiled life with a roseate mist, would have endowed its phenomena with unnatural magnitude and factitious importance—would have done, in other words, exactly what art ought to do, and must do if artists expect to make a living out of it.

Why have the novelists surrendered their proper function to the bootleggers? Or, on the other hand, why shouldn't they? The answer to those questions involves some of the elementary metaphysics of art—so elementary that it ought to be taught to students in the first grade, so elementary that there would be no excuse for mentioning it here if it were not for the obvious fact that this ancient lesson has been forgotten, or never learned at all, by some of the most highly esteemed of modern authors.

Whatever you may think of the Futilitarian novelists as artists, biologically they are degenerates. They have gone shamelessly back to the Stone Age. For so life must have appeared to the first men who speculated about it at all—futility and chaos, without form and void. And the reason we are not living in the Stone Age at present is that the natural tendency of most men, confronted with inexplicable chaos, is to try to explain it none the less—to read into it some sort of order, to cling to that order till it is plainly seen to be untenable, and then to invent some other order more nearly in accord with the evidence.

The first order, naturally, is a crude primitive animism. Every object of sense perception has in it some latent power of evil. Some of the Futilitarians have risen that far, which is at least one step above the primitive chaos, but none of them have gone any farther. And one cannot help feeling that there is more hope for the devil worshippers who see in the faults of our age the workings of certain Wicked Old Men at Versailles than for the reactionary Chaotics who cling to their dogma of the emptiness of everything as stubbornly (and, one suspects, as fearfully) as the late Mr. Bryan clung to Jonah and the Whale.

But, says your Futilitarian, we must Face the Facts. We must Tell the Truth. For an adequate answer to that one need go no farther than that much underrated gentleman, the late Pontius Pilate. "What is Truth?" he asked, and stayed not for an answer. If he had, he would be waiting yet. Personally, I am inclined to provisional agreement with the metaphysics of the Futilitarians. So far as I can see, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. But I am not convinced that I have attained truth, ever
Eliot happ

Granted
pliable, it is possible that we do not see all of it. The freaks of lightning were chaotic and inexplicable for a long time, and a human race which is (or was then) addicted to provisional explanation ascribed them to the caprices of a god. So even otherwise enlightened persons were till lately inclined to ascribe the freaks of sexual attraction, yet it seems highly probable that before long the laws of sexual attraction will be at least as well known as the laws of electricity are now (if indeed they are not a subdivision of the same subject). So in other matters. Mr. Woodward in "Lottery" has suggested that what we call crazy luck is perhaps merely the working of a natural law as yet undiscovered; that an attraction for undeserved material good fortune may be as much a part of a man's chemical constitution as an attraction for undeserved women.

So possibly the gentlemen who urge us to Face the Facts are not yet facing all the facts; which would make a difference. Perhaps they are not even facing all the facts that are perceptible now. The ancient metaphysicians held that the universe is not a chaos but an arrangement, even if unsatisfactory and incomplete, of indiscriminate matter; and the modern physicists have returned to

the same point of view. For a little while in ancient times, philosophy and science and art and religion (the religion of intelligent men, at least, if not popular religion) were at one in this view. So far it is quite possible that the ancients were right. Greek philosophy failed on its political side, because it was keyed to the city state which was washed off the map by the Macedonian conquests; and political failure shattered the whole system and diverted philosophy into the channel of personal ethics where it dried into the ground. But the cosmology of the later Greeks bears an amazing resemblance to the cosmology of the physicists of today, and the religion of intelligent men of our time is not so very different from the religion of Plato. Somebody or Something (take your choice according to taste) has started the business of arranging; the modern God is arranging still, even though he is apt to find his material a little too much for him. And the artist, seeing that arrangement is in fashion, thinks it no robbery to be equal with God to this extent.

But not the Futilitarians. Science and philosophy and religion may be coming to agreement once more; but if they have their way art must stand off in splendid isolation, clinging with fanatical zeal to the dogma of the meaningless life. In plain language, that is intellectual suicide; a deliberate rejection of all human progress, a deliberate return to the cave, if not to the treetops.

But this after all is matter for the metaphysician rather than the artist. The question which concerns the artist more directly, both as creator and as producer for the trade, is what is to be gained by facing the facts even assuming that they are as stated. Possibly life is mere sound and fury, signifying nothing. What of it? The Chaotics themselves will tell you that no profit is to be gained by facing such facts as these; nor is there much pleasure either. Few of us are so perverse as to get any hilarious delight out of prolonged contemplation of chaos. If there is no unifying principle, one must be invented for our own amusement—and secondarily for the amusement of the customers whose money enables the artist to live at his trade instead of selling gents' furnishings. Our unifying principle may be as mistaken as the conclusions of Thales or Heraclitus, but like them it will serve its purpose—which is to give temporary satisfaction to its inventor, and to persons who would rather listen to his entertaining inventions, even if they have to pay for them, than contemplate the chaos which anybody can see for himself.



Returning to Mr. Gerhardi, from whose latest novel I went away sorrowing, for he has great possessions if he would only use them. He owes his success, I believe, to the praise of Mrs. Wharton, who found in his earlier novel, "Futility," the first account of Russians which was comprehensible to her. She found the explanation in the fact that Mr. Gerhardi, being half Russian and half European, was able to function as a Mediator between the two worlds, a sort of Logos ranging the ineffable mysteries of the Russian soul into a pattern comprehensible to men. Unfortunately Mr. Gerhardi's second novel lends a good deal of support to the heresies of the Monophysites, if not of the Gnostics. There is only one nature in him, one gathers from "The Polyglots," and that is Russian. All the rest is mere phantasm.

So Mr. Gerhardi, having found that in the life of Eastern Siberia in 1919 all was vanity and vexation of spirit, sets it down exactly as he saw it. Now one may grant that this was a peculiarly aggravated form of chaos, though ultimately it did work out into a sort of order. But even if Mr. Gerhardi saw no patterns in it, if his Russian soul derived an unnatural pleasure from its pointlessness, it was hardly fair to assume that this pleasure would be shared by non-Russian readers. The Russian literature that is read abroad has some sort of pattern. It may be a loose pattern as in Tolstoy, a close pattern as in Turgenev, even an accidental pattern as in Artzibashev's "Breaking Point," where that endless succession of suicides made a magnificent farce for Western readers out of something that probably seemed tragic to the Russians. But a pattern there must be.

There are Russians, after all, who protest that Russia is not the Great Incomprehensible. Whether they are right or not, there is or has been

something in Russia besides formless laxity. The organized aggressive Russia of Nicholas I and Skobelov and the Treaty of San Stefano, which had all Europe scared, was as real in its day as the chaotic Russia of Artzibashev and Kerensky. And even in the chaos of revolutionary Russia a creative artist was able to impose his own order.

All literature, as Mr. Cabell and others have reminded us, is ultimately literature of escape—escape for the artist, and, if he is lucky, for his readers too. But our Futilitarians seem to have no desire to escape from the sticky chaos around them; they love to wallow in it, and paleontology suggests that this is a very perilous occupation for any of the larger mammals. The species that wallowed are the species whose bones are now on display in the Museum on Central Park West; the species that still survive, notably the species known as *Homo Sapiens* which contemplates the evidence of paleontology (none too sapiently in the case of the Chaotic novelists) are the species which had energy enough to try to bring order out of chaos, or sense enough, failing that, to seek an escape.

We live in an age of disintegration, but only inexcusable ignorance of history can account for the impression that it is the first of its kind. It is the sixth major period of disintegration in recorded European history; and the record of the five preceding ages teaches that the chaos succeeding the breakup of old patterns is inevitably followed by the formation of new patterns. That the artist can occasionally help in that process is suggested by one of the classic instances of the literature of escape, St. Augustine's "City of God."

The age which Augustine contemplated was quite as appallingly chaotic as that which has come under the observation of Miss Rose Macaulay or Mr. Aldous Huxley. Rome had fallen, the world was breaking up; even as Augustine wrote the Vandals were at the gate. In that situation Augustine reacted instinctively as the true artist will always react; he sought a pattern, and finding none in the mass of external phenomena he rolled his own. He evolved an order out of his own consciousness, and this pattern, a work of the creative imagination forced by the need to escape from unendurable reality, served very largely as the model on which Europe was ultimately reorganized in a new order which endured for centuries. It can be argued that Augustine did more lasting harm to the human race than all the Goths and Vandals who ever looted a palace or stormed a wall; but that is beside the point. Augustine is an instance of man fighting instead of surrendering, fighting his way upward. Not very far up as yet? Perhaps not; but do our Futilitarians really wish that *Homo Sapiens* had gone the way of *Eoanthropus*?

It may perhaps offend the pious to turn from St. Augustine to M. Paul Morand, but M. Morand is so much a child of his time that his difference from Messrs. Huxley and Gerhardi may be instructive. It is no doubt fundamentally a racial difference. M. Morand is a Frenchman, a member of an orderly race. He sees life as sound and fury signifying nothing very much, but he is unable to refrain from establishing certain axes of reference, curious though they may be. M. Morand, in fact, bears some resemblance to Herodotus, who in his travelogues gave much space to some peoples and little to others, but always mentioned two items about every nation he described—its religious ritual and its amatory technique. M. Morand is fortunate enough to live in a world whose outward religious observances are substantially uniform, so he saves that much space; and if his point of view seems unnecessarily simplified, it is at least a point of view. Consider what Mr. Huxley or Mr. Gerhardi would have made out of such a story as "Les Plaisirs Rhenans."

It would be going too far to suggest that chaos lies not in the material but in the soul of the artist. The point is that order, if there be any, lies, and always has lain, and must always lie, in the soul of the artist, whether it be the soul of a Great Architect of the Universe or of a practising fictioneer. And the practising fictioneer has somewhat more of a practical need for seeing an order, or in default of that pretending to see one—it makes little difference which, for his sake or that of his customers.