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Round about Parnassus

By William Rose Benét

SINCE the appearance of Robinson Jeffers none of the more recent male American poets has received greater encomia than has Hart Crane. And this arose immediately with the publication of his "White Buildings." We ourself derived very little from "White Buildings" save the impression of a wild talent which might make itself articulate when it chose to submit to some of the means of communication afforded by a proper use of the English language, which has proved quite flexible enough for greater writers who chose to use and not abuse its syntax. Undoubtedly a gift for imagery appeared in this newcomer, undoubtedly an intensity of feeling and a sensitivity to mood. And there was always the reckless reach for striking phrase which more than half the time eluded the grasp. Rhetoric there was in abundance, and rhetoric there is in abundance in Mr. Crane's latest, and second, volume, "The Bridge," which is the most ambitious flight he has yet attempted. It endeavors to wrest from its breast the full significance of Northern America, the utilitarian grace and beauty of the Brooklyn Bridge—such grace and beauty as always abides in great engineering—being its myth and symbol.

Dispensing with the book's dust cover, loaded with quotations from the poet's admirers, we gave ourselves to the poem itself, the mere binding of which is dignified and striking. We read the poem through at a sitting, no great feat, inasmuch as it is not very long. The total impression made is that the author is an outstanding modern writer. He has, perhaps, a touch—how slight or great it may be we are not prepared to say—of the thing called genius. He has the fire in his bowels. And he does things to the English language that make us wish to scream in torment.

The use of intransitive verbs as transitive verbs, the use of nouns as verbs, the jarring of mismated adjectives and nouns, the typographical tricks, so many wild phrases like "Who grindest oar, and arguing the mast Subscribest holocaust of ships," a great deal of sound and fury in reality signifying very little, cannot negate the fact that on occasion the cascading fervor of this poet's speech sweeps aside his obvious faults and raises the rainbow of his vision before our eyes. Nor may one scientifically analyze the spectrum of that rainbow, except to say that, in spite of his homage to Whitman, it seems to be his own. He has borrowed technical devices here and there, and has not thoroughly assimilated them. He is, once more, but half articulate. He has failed in creating what might have been a truly great poem, failed through the impatience and overconcern with mere impressionism which are characteristics of this age. One feels that though he has observed keenly and sometimes minutely the life about him, though he has read history with intuition, and though he has grasped swiftly some of the potencies of the tongue he speaks, he has need of a mental discipline that would teach him organization and control of his material.

One hesitates to say this of a young poet, because one of the virtues of the early work of a man who has not yet quite come into his own lies often in blazing his own trail and learning from the mistakes of his ambitions. And some of Mr. Crane's most successful moments are due to his sheer recklessness; he is an unbaffled though not always a successful Prometheus. Or he is like the bloody sparrow that climbed up the bloody spout. His farewell to the Bridge in the last section of his poem, "Atlantis," soars through such verbiage indeed that he eventually declares:

Migrations that must needs void memory,
Inventions that cobblestone the heart,—
Unspeakable Thou Bridge to Thee, O Love.
Thy pardon for this history, whitest Flower,
O Answerer of all,—Anemone,—
Now while thy petals spend the suns about us, hold—
(O Thou whose radiance doth inherit me)
Atlantis,—hold thy floating singer late!

which is indeed rather hard to disentangle. It is, at best, but a fervent stammer.

But to realize the force of this poem one must not read it piecemeal. One must make the best of certain apparently undecipherable passages. Mr. Crane can invoke the Bridge in much more inspired terms, as in his Proem:

And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced
As though the sun took step of thee, yet left
Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,—
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

After the Proem we hear Columbus speaking in "Ave Maria" where

. . . waves climb into dusk on gleaming mail;
Invisible valves of the sea,—locks, tendons
Crested and creeping, troughing corridors
That fall back yawning to another plunge.

He is to bring back Cathay, as he believes. Section II, "Powhatan's Daughter," begins with "Harbor Dawn," almost wholly successful, and follows with "Van Winkle," "The River" (perhaps the most powerful division of this section), and "The Dance," in which the spirit of Pocahontas first truly appears.

We danced, O Brave, we danced beyond their farms,
In cobalt desert closures made our vows. . . .
Now is the strong prayer folded in thine arms,
The serpent with the eagle in the bough.

This is followed by "Indiana," a pioneer mother's farewell to her son, a sentimental interlude, to which succeed "Cutty Sark," "Cape Hatteras," and "Three Songs." We cannot but think that Mr. Crane is at his best when he deals with the sea, save for the remarkable section following on "Three Songs" and "Quaker Hill," successive as they are to "Cape Hatteras." The section to which we refer is entitled "The Tunnel," and we know of no poem about a ride on the Interborough under the river which could better it. "The Tunnel" comes directly before the final section, "Atlantis." It might be said to furnish an Inferno to be contrasted with a Paradiso. When "The Bridge" is concluded we have had glimpses of a great deal of America. We have been reminded of the special American significance Vachel Lindsay found in the legend of Pocahontas, we have recalled Herman Melville, "Cape Hatteras" has yielded up Walt Whitman, we have looked on the gigantic Mississippi, and the ghost of Edgar Allan Poe has ridden with us on the subway. We have adventured with the airplanes of this modern age. We have had variety enow.

And, to speak for ourself, we found it all quite fascinating. Our demurrer is entered against too great haphazardness in the organization of the material and against phraseology that often clots against all sense and that even sometimes descends to the banal. But there is a sweep to this poem; it is a most interesting failure; and it reveals potencies in the author that may make his next work even more remarkable.

Edgar Lee Masters has not been heard from in poetry for some time. We have recently read his "Gettysburg, Manila, Ácoma," in a limited edition of three hundred and seventy-five numbered copies. "Gettysburg" deals with Booth just before he assassinated Lincoln, "Manila" gives the Filipino side of our annexation of the Philippines, "Ácoma" is laid in "the City of the Sky" in New Mexico. The first two poems are indictments of America, particularly "Manila," in which finally the voices of the Philippines, Porto Rico, Cuba, Nicaragua, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, and even China and Japan are heard against the sins of statesmen. Masters knows his history, and these poetic dramas possess an historical interest. Yet their long-winded blank verse becomes extremely tedious and the more lyrical passages sometimes slip into almost unbelievable banalities. It is a long way back to "Spoon River." We prefer the New Mexican verse drama to the others, as poetry. And we prefer to quote this from it in closing:

Come white dawn youths out of you, rising Sun,
With wild verbenas,
With meadow foam, and larkspur; where you run
Fling wild azaleas;
Strew ghost flowers for the stars, and whispering bells
Where the lonely hill is;
And heap the heights with thistles, and the dells
With desert lilies:
These for the light, O Sun, which on the rim
Of the mountain quivers,
As milk weeds shiver where the swallows skim
The silver rivers.

As for the force of indictment, we have only to consider William Vaughn Moody's "For a Soldier fallen in the Philippines," the effectiveness of which is superior to anything in "Manila" or, indeed, to the whole poem. And as for the end of the Civil War and the soldiers returning, we have fairly recent examples of quite as effective writing, let us say, concerning Lincoln's last phase, though not from Booth's point of view.

Strange Adventure

THE WORLD BELOW. By S. Fowler Wright. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1930. $2.00.

THE hero of this book is projected, as in Wells's "Time Machine," half a million years into the future, and returns to tell the excellent tale. He finds no men like gods, nor even any leisure class degenerating into children through millenniums of security; that would not suit the grim talent of the author of "The Island of Captain Sparrow." There are still violence and warfare in the future he encounters, although evolution is so far developed that he is most at home with a furry race he calls Amphibians, who, he conjectures, may be the distant descendants of dogs; their minds are far in advance of ours, but he can communicate with them on something like an equality, while the humans he meets, have less in common with him than he with a beast.

The book falls naturally into parts, social satire and pure adventure. The satire is by much the weaker part. To postulate an immensely superior race with no comprehension of our difficulties and explain our world to some of them, whether they are Houyhnhnms, Utopians, or Amphibians, is always a little facile and now not novel. Sometimes Mr. Wright's desire to satirize his own time leads him into inconsistencies; for instance, his Amphibian heroine regards the hero's body with a contemptuous loathing such as we feel for vermin; but since the ruling race in that world is in appearance exactly like humans of colossal size, there seems no reason to suppose that she would have such feelings. The satire, however, occupies only a small part of the book, and the temptation to it must have been very great.

The strength of the book lies in the adventures, related with a combination of extravagant imagination and sober verisimilitude which makes Mr. Wright unique. He has wisely refrained from much talk of inventions which must necessarily be incomprehensible to his readers; instead he writes of monsters, and strange species that are still in the status of wild animals, though they have in some ways more powerful minds than anything now on earth. Readers of "The Island of Captain Sparrow" will remember how Mr. Wright there portrayed man-eating cassowaries and satyrs, with a conviction and detail that made them, for the purposes of fiction, quite credible; in his latest book he uses this same Defoe-like gift of detailed, unadorned narrative to win belief in far stranger things, and succeeds amazingly. For that reason his scenes of peril or cruelty have a gripping quality that is absent from most imaginative work. One will not soon forget the incident of the hero's being tossed carelessly into a basket together with the severed heads of some hideous brutes which retain enough vitality in death to keep snapping at him, or his long run down a cavernous corridor, in which bloodsucking tongues, like leeches, shoot out at every footfall, and pull him down if he pauses an instant to rest. And these are only two among many of the matter-of-fact fantasies that fill the book. Mr. Wright has an extraordinary fertility of invention, and with it a certain hardness of thought that is a valuable quality in a writer of adventure stories. "The World Below" is an almost painfully absorbing story.

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A Letter from London

By J. B. Priestley

THIS month, I am not really in a position to write about the English book world. I have spent most of this last month out of the country, in Germany. I can tell you more about German bookshops than I can about our own. But why shouldn't I say something about these German bookshops? I will. I will say first that they make me feel ashamed of my own country. There are so many of the German bookshops, to begin with. Every little town seems to have at least one or two. And bookshops in Germany are really bookshops; they do not disgrace the dignity of letters; they are filled with good editions of good authors; they are attractively set out; they suggest that both the proprietor and his customers care about books, real books. The very recollection of them makes me blush.

One or two things are worth noticing. The first is the incredible popularity of Galsworthy in Germany now. I think I saw more of Galsworthy's works displayed than the combined total of any other three authors, German, English, American, or French. The greatest German novelist of today is, in my opinion, Thomas Mann. I am not sure that Mann is not the greatest living novelist. If there is a post-war novel of greater intellectual force, more vivid, more memorable, than Mann's "Magic Mountain," all I can say is that I am not acquainted with it. And I thought I should find these very dignified and intelligent looking German bookshops crammed with the works of Thomas Mann. But not a bit of it. For one Mann there were a dozen Galsworthys. This is very odd, for not only is Galsworthy a foreigner, but he is not, in my opinion, Mann's equal. On the other hand, there was a noticeable lack of translations of other English and American authors. Galsworthy was first, Edgar Wallace next, Shaw third, and the rest nowhere. I noticed one or two rather forlorn Wells, Bennetts, and Walpoles, that was all. If I saw a single Conrad, it has escaped my memory. It is true, of course, that many Germans read English and become acquainted with us in the Tauchnitz Library, which has done good service to continental readers of English, though I must confess that I can never understand by what criterion, either of literary quality or popularity, the Tauchnitz editors choose their books. Meanwhile, I wish somebody would examine and report on the amazing growth of Galsworthy's fame everywhere during the last few years.

Let me admit at once, though, that the German craze for Galsworthy, though surprising and somewhat out of proportion, is not silly, whereas the fuss here a year or two ago about Feuchtwanger and his "Jew Süss" was profoundly ridiculous, for Feuchtwanger was an obvious second-rater and those critics of ours (and some of them were men of mark) who started the fuss ought to have been ashamed of themselves. Probably there is some truth in the observation of a cynical friend of mine, who holds that in our more perfervid literary circles there always has to be some "foreign fraud" held up for admiration.

I have returned to find that the Spring season is by no means drying up. I missed the actual publication of Humbert Wolfe's "Celestial City," but it seems to have excited the critics of contemporary verse (no bad thing, that, and Wolfe nearly always manages to do it) either to extravagant praise or downright abuse. I have not been able to give it the serious attention that I hope it deserves, but a hasty reading suggests that it contains, as usual with Wolfe, some fine lyrics, but is not very successful as a piece of narrative in verse. There is a certain fizziness, a soda-water quality, about Wolfe's poetry that makes a sustained achievement very difficult for him. He is an immensely clever and attractive person, but as a very brilliant and hard working civil servant, a reviewer and occasional critic, a witty diner-out, he must lead a kind of life that puts every obstacle between him and a solid long poem.

In biography, Edmund Blunden's long expected life of Leigh Hunt is attracting most attention. It is, of course, a very good piece of work, but, rather surprisingly, a little deficient on the critical side. What Blunden does makes plain is the character and baleful influence of Hunt's wife, who drank hard, borrowed unscrupulously, and alienated half his friends. Bookmen should make the acquaintance of "A Hundred Years of Publishing," which is the history of the famous house of Chapman and Hall, written by its retiring managing director, Arthur Waugh, himself an excellent critic. Chapman and Hall were, of course, Dickens's publishers; they published Trollope and many another giant too; and for years George Meredith was their reader; so nobody can say that their history was not worth recording. Arthur Waugh, father of Alec and Evelyn, and a man of books if there ever was one, has done his work very well.

Fiction is plentiful rather than exciting. Has Miss Sackville-West's "The Edwardians" reached you yet? Strictly considered as a novel, it is not very good, for the people in it are hardly real and the action is somewhat preposterous; but, on the other hand, it does what it really set out to do, that is, give a picture of the smartest Edwardian society and life in one of the grandest of the old English country houses, superbly well. Miss Sackville-West's rather formal prose, and its constant ironic undertones, is put to good service in the many fine descriptive passages; and the account of the Coronation, magnificently done, provides the right climax. If the book does not have a considerable success, both with you and with us, I shall be greatly surprised. And I have just read what seems to me the most promising first novel of the year, "Other Man's Saucer," by J. Keith Winter. Arnold Bennett has just told us that a book by a young writer cannot possibly be strong and original unless it shocks everybody, or nearly everybody. (I know what he means, but nevertheless, I think he is talking nonsense, and you have only to glance at a history of literature to see that I am right. This business of shocking people belonged to a certain period, the Shaw-Wells-Bennett epoch, and that period is now over. There is now no further necessity for the author as irritant, not in this country at any rate.)

Keith Winter should be a young author after Bennett's own heart, for in this one short novel, he succeeds in producing almost the maximum number of shocks. It is a study of a sensitive youth whose mind becomes warped because he too, like the reader, receives a number of shocks. We see him at home, with his queer scatter-brained family, at school, and then at an Oxford that is created simply out of the most unpleasant elements of the real Oxford. If the writer had introduced his very ugly sexual episodes and all the extraordinary violence of action and language (for these youngsters hurl themselves at one another's throats at the least provocation) merely to startle the reader into attention to himself, he would not be worth discussing, but quite obviously, to my mind, he has been entirely sincere, working out a theme that is very important to himself. It is a very young book and sometimes topples from the tragic into the absurd, but there is no doubt about its unusual intensity and queer vividness. Unless the author is like one of his own characters, and either murders somebody for fun or commits suicide out of boredom, we shall hear of J. Keith Winter again as a novelist, and probably hear a great deal too. Look out for him, but do not blame me if you are shocked.

My friend, Frank Kendon, the poet, has written an autobiography of his childhood, which has been published with an introduction by de la Mare, by the Cambridge University Press. I have a right to mention it here, if only because it has been very prominently and enthusiastically noticed this last week. It is beautifully written, and all the impressions of childhood have been caught and recorded in the most vivid and truthful way. It is a very quiet book, by the most modest man I have ever known, and no doubt it will create little stir in the noisy book world. Nevertheless, I say here and now that the book is a little classic, something done once and for all and done beautifully, and I advise everybody who cares about childhood and good prose to get hold of it.

The death of W. J. Locke was not unexpected, for he had been in very bad health for some time. There was little or no real creative impulse behind all his later stories, which were made on a formula, and there was not much beyond good craftsmanship and pleasant, easy writing in them. For years and years, he was what we should call now an unsuccessful highbrow, and then he suddenly became a very successful lowbrow. He never quite succeeded in breaking into the spacious, healthy country of the broadbrows, where there is good writing, tragedy, and fun for everybody. But almost to the last, he had what most of his colleagues in the popular magazines never dreamt of, a certain distinction of manner, as if his stuff were haunted by a ghost from the fastidious 'nineties.

Galdós's Reminiscences

MEMORIAS. Por Benito Pérez Galdós. Obras inéditas, Vol. X. Prólogo de Alberto Ghiraldo. Madrid: Renacimeniento. 1930.

Reviewed by Wilfred A. Beardsley
Goucher College

THESE "Memorias" are the tenth posthumous volume of Benito Pérez Galdós, edited by the South American writer, Alberto Ghiraldo, and they appear in the tenth year since the death of the author. They were written under tremendous difficulties; Pérez Galdós was already old, blind, and impoverished. His work during the last few years of his life had to be done by dictation, and he was still working on these "Memorias" the day before he died.

Yet with all these extraordinary handicaps, the work is literally pervaded with a delightful whimsicality. At first, the casual reader is likely to think the material a trifle "thin," but it is not long before its very good nature and lack of pomposity appear little short of heroic.

Probably Pérez Galdós, though almost equally famous as novelist and dramatist, will be chiefly remembered as the writer of the series referred to by the critic, Romera-Navarro, as "the most ambitious undertaking in the Spanish novel"—a *comédie humaine* no doubt inspired by Balzac, and of which the great realist would have every reason to be proud. These are the famous "Episodios Nacionales," and considerable light is thrown upon their local color and inspiration by these "Memorias." For example Pérez Galdós was present in Barcelona at the time of the Revolution which overthrew Isabel II. He was in Madrid when General Prim, hero of the Revolution, entered the capital. Not long afterward he saw the corpse of Prim being carried to church.

These were most dramatic—and tragic—moments, and without question contributed toward making Pérez Galdós the serious social writer which he became. He began with dramas in verse and in prose, but did not try to put them before the public until years after making his reputation as a novelist.

"A Sentimental Voyage"

VISAGES DE LA SUÈDE. By Christian De Caters. Paris: Plon. 1930.

Reviewed by William Leon Smyser

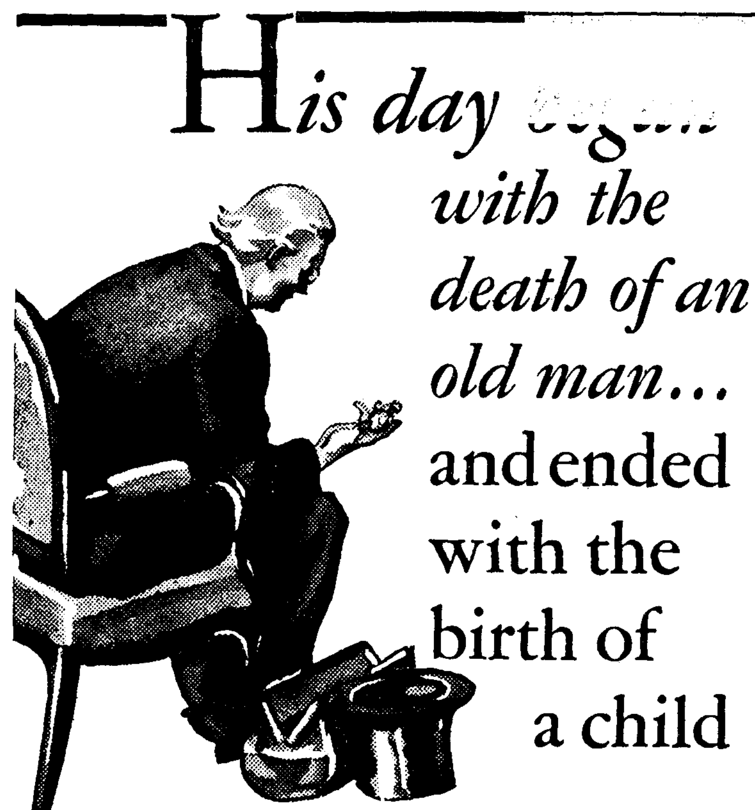
INSPIRED by the renascent *voyageur* tradition, Christian de Caters has visited Sweden. His canvas, in "Visages de la Suède," is much broader than that of Maurice Bedel, whose "Jérôme" won the Prix Goncourt some seasons ago. He attempts a composite picture of cities, industries, handicrafts, forests, folklore, and flirtations. Though this be not fiction, it is travel with a spice of romance and sentiment.

It is with regret that Caters takes his leave of the Värmland district where he has paid homage to the country of Ekeby forges and of Selma Lagerlöf, yet two days later he is happily motoring through a rival district, the Dalecarlia, with a charming Swedish miss by his side. She wants to know why French girls must always go about chaperoned. The passage is typical. This author, like Bedel, has carried with him into the foreign northland *le culte de la jeune fille*. Cyclists, of a precarious virtue, follow strenuous courses across the peninsula. Two girl canoeists pass on an unknown lake. Before her hut in Lapland we make the acquaintance of a winsome yet self-sufficing school-marm, exiled among semi-savages whom for the six sunny months she teaches.

"For a Frenchman," Christian de Caters decides, "it is easy to make love to a Scandinavian, because the men of this country have never learned the gentle art of paying compliments."

But since a sentimental voyage cannot interpret all of Sweden, "Visages de la Suède" does well to emphasize the new industrial age in Scandinavia, and to record a miracle of machinery and high tension which has brought sudden prosperity to a land which three generations ago was obliged to see its best sons emigrate. Sweden's forests now pass through sulphite baths to be bleached white for the twentieth century's news print. Sweden's mines supply the world's best steel. Christian de Caters has drawn the full portrait of a people at work and at play.

His day began with the death of an old man... and ended with the birth of a child



Doctor SEROCOLD
by Helen Ashton

Between 2:30 a.m. (the death of the doctor's partner) and 11:45 p.m. (the birth of Mrs. Perkins's baby) you join an old-fashioned physician on his daily round of an English village. With him you explore the interior of many lives. For this novel is a page from the day-book of Doctor Serocold, whose patients bring him not only the ills of their bodies but the ills of their hearts, their secrets as well as their symptoms. Arnold Bennett says: "I recommend this book without reserve." Frank Swinnerton says: "It has given me real delight." $2.50

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN

Book-of-the-Month Club Selection for July

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