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Section Three

Fiction and the Laboratory

ONE of the most distinguished American students of the novel, discussing in the current issue of the quarterly of which he is editor, "the new fiction," concludes his demonstration of the fashion in which our present-day writers of romance tend to treat character, apart from background, with the statement: "You cannot thus isolate and study a character as you would a germ or a bug, and stop there . . . In real life every one finds himself in some environment where there is a constant play of action and reaction. So it must be in any novel that would give the semblance of real life." Or, in other words, so it must be in any novel that is to survive the moment's tidal wave of interest in the psychoanalytical or to hold the attention of a future generation that may be more interested in the synthesis of society than in the revolt of the individual.

When Professor Cross goes on to add that the novel is growing ever "thinner and thinner," he implies no lack of earnestness in the new fiction, but an absence of that succession of incident and interplay of forces that have in the past been regarded as inalienable attributes of the novel. Modern fiction, he says, lacks background and variety. It lacks background and variety; yes, and because it does it lacks also nobility. Not seriousness, or sincerity, or purpose, for all of these it has in good measure, pressed down and running over, but that high dignity that comes from the realization that the pageant of life is something larger than the individuals that make up its ceaseless procession. The Greeks, with their exquisite sense of proportion, never lost sight of the place of the individual in his universe, and the majesty of their literature derived from its depiction of the uneven struggle of man against the gods, its projection of him as the agent and victim of fate. No less absorbed by the human comedy, the great writers of modern times, like the ancients, won to immortality on an art that presented man against a background of the world in which he lived, as protagonist of his own fate in the warfare of human passions against environment and the codes and conventions of society. But the novelists of today have shrunk the world to the aura of the individual, and are representing the whole tenor of life as the outcome of a single controlling impulse. They are increasingly making fiction, not criticism and reflection of life, but scientific analysis of individual lives. They are resolving the novel into a study of complexes and repressions as the novel of the early eighteenth century was sometimes a study of "humors."

The danger, of course, to which the contemporary novelists have fallen prey is the danger that always attacks the specialist—that of becoming so engrossed in a particular phase of existence as to interpret all life in terms of its phenomena. "At present they are immensely interested in the application to literature of recently promulgated psychological theories, and as yet are able to hold the public by their exposition of doctrine to which Freudian teaching has given a sudden vogue. But once that doctrine has become common knowledge, or been cast aside as insufficient explanation of human conduct, what will be the place of the fiction that set it forth? Rather that of interesting and illuminating social history than romance that holds permanent value as literature. For the art of fiction can, no more than science, live by dissection alone. It must do more than merely analyze personality and action if it is to convince, to illuminate, and to inspire. Our contemporary novelists will lose out in the long run because of their failure to depict the rich tapestry of life. So long as they are content merely to strip human nature of its concealments and to disclose the causes of human action, while to the social drama in its immensity they remain indifferent, they may produce novels that impress by the niceness of their psychological interpretation, and that arouse intellectual reaction to the struggles of their characters, but they will not be creating enduring literature. For not until they recapture interest in that "background and variety"

Pumas

By GEORGE STERLING

Hushed, cruel, amber-eyed,
Before the time of the danger of the day,
Or at dusk on the boulder-broken mountainside,
The great cats seek their prey.

Soft-padded, heavy-limbed,
With agate talons chiselled for love or hate,
In desolate places wooded or granite-rimmed,
The great cats seek their mate.

Rippling, as water swerved,
To tangled coverts overshadowed and deep
Or secret caves where the canyon's wall is curved,
The great cats go for sleep.

Seeking the mate or prey,
Out of the darkness glow the insatiate eyes.
Man, who is made more terrible far than they,
Dreams he is otherwise!

of life, the lack of which Professor Cross deplors in his article in the *Yale Review*, will they give to the world the fiction that permanently enriches it—the type of fiction that persuades by its balance, stimulates by its vision, and ennobles by its compassion.

The Appeal to Posterity

By JAMES BRANCH CABELL

CUSTOM assumes that time deals very carefully with reading matter, omnisciently discarding the trash and preserving to outlast a kingdom or two that which is finest. And probably the notion of this posthumous atonement for the current era's stupidity has heartened in every era the creative writer who viewed with a shared seriousness his craft and his income.

One may permissibly wonder, none the less, if time does actually right all in quite this taken-for-granted fashion. The present generation is the utmost that has thus far been produced in the way of posterity. It seems at least remarkable that we who have made the *Saturday Evening Post* a literary success second only to the Telephone Book should be the clear-eyed *cognoscenti* to whom dead poets appealed; and that it was in our standards of criticism they invested their life's labor and confidence. For "Les Contes Drolatiques" were really written for the beguilement of Dr. Brander Matthews, and it was with an eye upon Mr. H. L. Mencken that a Kempis compiled the "Imitation of Christ."

Now, not as that all-righting posterity do we approach, of course, the books we actually read. Nobody expects that our judgments of current literature be perennially brazen when two or three unbend in talk about that merchandise which is sold in the same "department" as stationery and string and glue. The rub is, rather, that our chief "classics" appear to have been selected and handed down to fame by the long arm of coincidence. That which remains to us of Greek and Roman literature composes by general consent our greatest treasure, the treasure which time has most thoroughly tested and approved. And it is precisely here that one finds least cause to suspect time of any entangling alliance with justice. There is no vaguest reason to suppose that of the Greek and Roman writers we have preserved, by any standards, what was best worth keeping; nor that of such authors as Aeschylus and Aristophanes, of whom oblivion has spared more than the name, we have retained the masterworks. We cherish, instead, each scrap that accident has made peerless by the destruction of its betters. And I might go on to speak, even more tediously, of Sappho and Petronius and Herondas, and of Virgil's foiled endeavors to destroy the latter part of his "Aeneid"—and about the dream that revealed the hiding place of Dante's lost cantos, and about Dr. Warburton's cook, and about how the Bible came by its present contents—to show through what queer accidents the world's chief "classics," the books which are likely always to remain in theory man's finest literary achievements, have been made just what they are. But the point is that they might quite as easily have been something else. The point is that they have not earned their present and probably perpetual rank by their preeminence in special qualities, nor by any æsthetic principle whatever. And if the supreme names and masterpieces of the world's literature have been tagged as such by justice—which always remains just barely possible—it was done without removing her bandage, in the hazards of a game of blind man's buff.

But I refrain, in charity, from such pedantic considerations. Here is need, though, to point out that before printing became pandemic the only way in which anybody's writing won a chance of survival was by some other person's finding its matter sufficiently congenial to be at pains to make a copy of it. In nature that which most rapturously recorded the insignificant went home to most bosoms, upon the chronic principle that still procures admirers for the philosophy of Dr. Frank Crane and for the novels of Floyd and Ethel M. Dell; so, from the first, his mediocrity had the best chance of survival. To the vitality of the mediocre I shall return. Meanwhile that dangerous invention of Gutenberg's has changed all: and has insured a fair chance of perpetuity for that which is excellent, provided always that excellence be not swept away unnoted and hidden by the spume and froth of the torrential river it floats in, that ever-passing deluge of current books. Sometimes befalls a favoring miracle of salvage, and such dis-

Table of Contents

Pumas.....	By George Sterling	521
Editorial: Fiction and the Laboratory.....		521
The Appeal to Posterity.....	By James Branch Cabell	521
"Selected Poems and Ballads of Paul Fort,"	Translated by John Strong Newberry.	
	Reviewed by Padraic Colum	522
"Saint Teresa," by Henry Sydnor Harrison.	Reviewed by William Lyon Phelps	523
"The Soul of a Child," by Edwin Björkman.	Reviewed by Johan J. Smertenko	523
"The Wolves of God," by Algernon Blackwood and Wilfred Wilson. A Review..		523
"Ireland and the Making of Britain," by Benedict Fitzpatrick.	Reviewed by E. Curtis	524
"Lenin," by M. A. Landau-Aldanov.	Reviewed by Alexander Naxaroff	524
"The Human Factor in Business," by B. Seebohm Rowntree.	Reviewed by Henry R. Seager	525
"The Consumers' Coöperative Movement," by Sidney and Beatrice Webb.	Reviewed by Richard S. Meriam	525
"The Book of Masks," by Remy de Gourmont.	Reviewed by John Strong Newberry	526
"Literary Culture in Early New England, 1620-1730," by Thomas Goddard Wright.	Reviewed by Carl Van Doren	526
"If," by Lord Dunsany.	Reviewed by William Rose Benét	527
The New Curiosity Shop: Offenders in the Audience.....	By Gluyas Williams	527
Literature Abroad.....	By Ernest Boyd	528
French-Canadian Literature.	By T. M. Morrow	529
Brief Reviews.....		530-531
Departments.....		532-540

Next Week; and Later

Harold Bell Wright, by W. H. Durham.
"L'Europa senza Pace," by Francesco S. Nitti, former Prime Minister of Italy. Reviewed by Hamilton Fish Armstrong.
Saintsbury's "A Letter Book," Reviewed by Maurice Hawlett.

similar lost argosies as those of Samuel Butler and Herman Melville, seems upstream with flying colors. But who may say how deep, how irretrievably, their betters may not be sunk or can gravely assert that literary permanence is in any very general demand among the buyers or publishers or writers of new books? Indeed, I know of no class of men which quite wholeheartedly desires the production and formal recognizing of any more "classics"; since even those who care for fine literature cannot but obscurely feel that there is already a deal more of it existent than any human being can hope to assimilate; and that already the literary pantheon of the self-respecting is thronged with gods whose virtues we are compelled in this limited lifetime to accept as an article of faith. There is, for example, Defoe or Richardson—or, of more recent hierarchs, Mr. Thomas Hardy or Mr. Joseph Conrad—before whose shrine many are zealous to pass with every possible form of respect which does not entail stopping. And I suspect that if the persons who cry up *Don Quixote* were afforded a choice between silence and reading every line of this world-famous "classic," there would no longer be any need to think an instant before you pronounce its name.

But I spoke of the vitality of the mediocre. The quality which makes for acknowledged greatness in a writer is—I know not how many textbooks have assured us—the universality of his appeal. His ideas are, in brief, the ideas which the majority of persons find acceptable; and Shakespeare has been praised, for once with absolute justice, as "the myriad-minded," because myriads have always had just such a mind as his. The writer of "classics," in short, has need of quite honest and limited thinking, and of an ability to utter platitudes with that wholesome belief in their importance which no hypocrisy or art can ever mimic. Of the letters of a foreign nation nobody can speak without some danger of magnifying his everyday folly. But it appears safe to point out that the main treasures of our national literature, including its British tributaries, really are, when considered in the light of the ideas they express, rather startlingly silly. The "ideas" of Chaucer and Shakespeare and Milton, when once looked at without prejudice, appear to wander sheepishly from the platitudinous to the imbecile, the while that their "stories" rove, in somewhat more the manner of the mountain goat, about the heights of idiocy. And when you compare the reality with the ideas which Scott and Thackeray and Dickens, quite gravely expressed about human existence, the incongruity breathes more of pathos than of mirth, for these novelists expressed the usual ideas.

Most persons really do believe, for example, that complete and abiding happiness is to be won by marriage until they have tried it; and, for that matter, widows have been known to carry this romanticism to the extreme of taking a second husband. And most persons do quite honestly believe that in the outcome wickedness is punished and virtue is rewarded (again) with a complete and abiding happiness, and in consequence of this belief most persons make it a point in social intercourse to check the most natural sort of impulses towards rape and murder. Most persons do, in fact, for various reasons think it best to be "good"; and do expect, for equally various reasons, to be happy by and by. Now, with hardly an exception the concededly "classic" writers have, without any detectable skepticism, set forth such popular notions, with every fit adornment of rhetoric and cunning diction; and their ideas have endured for the simple reason that they were enduring.

Yet here again, I am afraid, the fool is answered according to his folly. It is, when you think of it, a rather dreadful fate to become a classic. Once the writer is thus deified, his private character is the first burnt offering: for his cult has need of a legend, by preference a highly colored mythology of lechery and sexual *curiosa*, such as affords vicarious outlet to those desires which we imprison fearfully in ourselves, and reveals the demigod to be no better than anybody else. So Mary Fitton, and Georgina Hogarth, and Mrs. Brookfield are dragged into the saga; stout volumes are devoted to proving that Wordsworth begot a bastard or that Byron was caught in incest with his sister; nobody appears able to write about the tri-centennial of Molière without suggesting that his wife was also very probably his daughter; and all our literary gossip becomes a whispered ritual of phallic worship.

Nor do many of the anctorially great escape calumny in the form of a Complete Edition, wherein their self-confessed failures at writing, and the chips and rubbish of the workshop, and the rough drafts and notes designed for the waste-basket, and the politic ephemera into which most writers are allured by kindness and advertising purposes, are piddlingly amassed to be bound up, in pompous scavengery, with all the unsigned refuse from the back-files of magazines that can be "attributed" to the victim. None other of the dead has even his appointed executors combined to convict him of idiocy. And, of course, those luckier immortals who are recollected, however infrequently, by virtue of one book alone, are but too apt to get into some such collection as Everyman's Library, and have the upshot of their existence identi-

fied with the twaddle of Trollope and Jane Austen and Mrs. Cowden Clarke.

And the writer who is raised to the peerage of the remembered dead is likewise granted an estate, commensurate with his dignity, in the fields of human aversion. Luckless typesetters have to read every word of his books; in your library he usurps grudging shelf-room, in the bright armor of a binding too handsome to be relegated to the dust heap of any married man; the oppressed young have his loathed archaisms included in their "parallel reading" at school, where also they are sometimes put, to the *peine forte et dure* of "paring" him; in women's clubs he incurs the stigma of being quoted with approval from the platform, by persons in the bankruptcy of mind appropriate to that deadly eminence; and dear old bishops likewise quote him in their sermons, utilizing his dreams as hypnotics. He becomes, in fine, a nuisance, and is thought of with mingled condescension and haziness and dislike. And it appears, to the considerate, a prodigality of curtness thus in so many ways to "beat the bones of the buried" because their outcast owner once voiced memorably the common beliefs and hopes—the tonic fallacies, the sustaining delusions—which keep a vigorous heart in the ribs, and marrow in the bones, of all that are not buried, not yet.

There is no need to assume, however, that every "classic" author has from the beginning been commonplace in absolutely everything. It may happen, indeed, that a writer putting forth an unpopularly rational thought may have his heresy so generally assailed and so frequently controverted as to make it sufficiently hackneyed for wide acceptance; but mediocrity, even in "daringness" and "unconventionality," thrives from the first, and is the firmer assured of posterity's respectful reprinting. And the display of uncommon mentality is, as a rule, as fatal to the literary life of a book as it is to the physical life of man.

For there really does seem to be over all a force—to be labelled what you will—that is hostile to the undue development, in any direction, of man's mind. The scheme of things, it may be, requires of us no more than that we live tranquilly and propagate; these appear in any event the only inborn human desires to be encountered everywhere. And perhaps the phenomena called "literary genius" and "artistic ability" are, *inter alia*, vexatious little mishaps, a trifle gone wrong, in the broad working out of a scheme which they minutely hamper. So the small contrempts is remedied forthwith. The person afflicted with "genius" is removed, be it by his other diseases or by his fellows' natural dislike of him it hardly matters; either way, there is by ordinary in his removal a smack of haste; and you will note that, whether in polity or mercy, it is somehow provided that his children do not inherit his affliction. So does life seem to keep her pawns from errancy. So does she seem to restrict them, even with some show of pettishness, to the arena and service of her large, dim, patient gaming; and wisdom bids us emulate this patient the while that we get bread and children and die with no more active discomfort than is unavoidable.

And yet even so, in the bared teeth of outraged reason, no one of us rests quite content to be a mere transmitter of life, and to serve as one of many million instruments in life's inexplicable labor, used for a little while as such, and then put by, worn out and finished with forever. We appeal against oblivion. And not only does the shatter-pated artist appeal: the pharaohs have filed pyramidal caveats, the best thought of business men yet enter demurrers in the form of public libraries; there is no tombstone, however modest, but insanely appeals to posterity to keep in mind somebody's dates of birth and death and middle name. For we will to continue here, in the world known to us, to continue if only as syllables; we all will not to be forgotten utterly by those that shall inherit our familiar dear estate of muddleheadedness and fret and failure. Yet here is an odd thing: We can pretend to offer no example worth the following, not even any salutary instance of just what to avoid; nor can we, in any of the limbo which have been divinely revealed, thus far, as the goal of all that lives, derive from being so remembered the least minim of profit. We are spurred by neither altruism nor self-seeking, the counsellor that persuades to the appeal remains anonymous; and it seems that, here again, some power which mocks at reason is moving us to serve unknown but, one suspects, not unappointed ends.

"Macmillan will shortly publish a new volume of poems by Thomas Hardy entitled, 'Late Lyrics and Earlier, with many Other Verses,'" says the *Manchester Guardian*. "There are upwards of 150 pieces in all, about half of which have either been crowded out from previous volumes and held over in manuscript or overlooked in past collections. The remaining half have been written recently. Anticipating the objection of certain critics to several of the more recent pieces, which may be considered 'too elegiac, too tragic, too phantasmal, too cathartic, or what not for contemporary feelings,' the author admits that some grave productions are interspersed among the lighter ones."

The Bright Phenomenal

"SELECTED POEMS AND BALLADS OF PAUL FORT." Translated from the French by JOHN STRONG NEWBERRY. With an Introduction by LUDWIG LEWISOHN. New York: Duffield & Co. 1921. \$3.50.

Reviewed by PADRAIC COLUM

PAUL FORT has likened himself to Shelley and thereby he has shown how mistaken a poet can be about his affinities: if ever there was a poet who strove to get through the phenomenal it was Shelley; if ever there was a poet who is content with the phenomenal it is Paul Fort.

Indeed, it is by his blithe acceptance of appearance that he makes his appeal; he puts us into a holiday mood: all's well with the world, and the world is just what we see in the woods and seas and cornfields, on the roads and in the cities. We are on an excursion. If there is an appearance that raises a pensive feeling, why, just beyond there is another appearance that will make us feel good again. I take "In the Wood" in John Strong Newberry's admirable translation as representative of Paul Fort's feeling:

A brooklet flows beneath the vaulted wood.
Between the mosses emerald pale, lilies frail pursue its
song, others enshroud its bed with shadows moist and blue;
A dead birch huddles on its bank; the scab beetles o'er it
skim. Fallen birch leaves, tinged with red, choke the channel
dark and dim. Among the mosses a wild and lonely
thought fixes my dream with its minute regard.

Why, O my God, should things that are so small (a
brooklet flows beneath the vaulted wood) with their little
life of moving shadow call this horrible despair to dusk my
mood? Is it because of this monotonous song of a current
almost stifled in its bed, or of those things that seem a
phantom throng, their sleep with endless sorrow overpread;
is it because of life that is so brief, thinking how strait
and narrow is our world, that I should seek no cause for
death's reprieve, nor any reason why mankind was born,
save that beyond the border of the wood, like some clear
beacon-fire by Nature set, like a summons of this world to
light and joy, there shines the vivid green of growing corn?

A brooklet flows beneath the vaulted wood.

It is always "the bright phenomenal" that he gives us, that he is never weary of giving us. If Ovid had not fallen into disrepute with the poets of today for no other reason than that they had grown weary of the mythology out of which he wove his endless *Metamorphoses*, Paul Fort's admirers—and their name is legion—might very fairly have recommended him as a latter-day Ovid. He, too, comes in the twilight of faith, and with a mere literary credulity he touches upon legends sacred and profane. He is an Ovid who had made Voltaire his God. Like Ovid's his figures are often seen as dissolving into something of another order. Read one of the finest of his poems—"The Dolphin"—and you will see the inner likeness of the modern to the ancient poet of the phenomenal:

Come, O my dream, behold to what ardour intimate doth
palpitate and yield Ocean's eternal flow. The current's tepid
sheath to ribbands I have split. Onward I fly upborne by
madrepores aglow. Thou that synthesized all life, obscure
and nighty vat, to which the universe owes dolphins and
their dreams—Life's heaving forces burst in phosphorescent
streams within thy tide robust where, luminous, I plunge. In
deep abysses blue seethe the primal growths of sponge. Hill
vertebrae upheave crest perpendicular. What things I see!
O gulfs! O my distracted flight! All the soft azure swarm
of medusas there respire. There, wreathing emerald whorls,
the giant mosses thrive. Was that heat lightning's flare,
round the horizon swirled? This waste of golden sand is
nothing but a light. . . . Here is death, and just beyond
the whole of life stir. Black quiverings of kelp above a
crumbled world where a precipice's brow lets roam its
forests red. How much the ocean's bed is ruined and alive!

I chase a gleaming wave made amorously bare,
She blinds me all at once. 'Tis to make my bliss more keen.
This other has a breast defaced with hydras pale. Come on
her back to see what wills the jealous one. For I adore them
all. Towards none my love shall fail. Gay, passionate,
perverse alike, I must possess, and my white breast has found
myriads of mistresses.

Of course, Paul Fort has not the richness that was given to Ovid; nor has he Ovid's form. The free forms that he uses have been praised by critics in French and English. Amy Lowell praises them, Professor Lewisohn praises them in his very just introduction to the present volume. But it seems to me that, after Paul Fort has made his initial adventures in free forms, what followed could not have been difficult to him. These forms do not represent a conquest of the material. Much of this verse must have been as easy to write as the stanzas of "Don Juan," which were made up while Byron was shaving.

He is the poet of psychic uplift. We cannot read him without a feeling of exhilaration. His verses stream like banners on the wind. His images delight and astonish us. He is the most companionable of bards. For, as Professor Lewisohn says, he is the modern equivalent of the troubadour and the balladist. "He wanders the roads of the world. He sees a landscape, a vivid gesture; a historical incident floats into his mind. He indites a ballad. Since he loves all things he makes no distinction between noble and ignoble." You can have from him songs of the fields and song of sentimental Paris; you can have from him his historical stories and songs of the battlefields of yesterday. An abundant poet and one who in translation is bound to have a liberating influence. And he is fortunate in having for translator one who is able to get prancing lines and bell-sounding rhymes