

MISCELLANEOUS

BOOK REVIEWS

THE NEWER SPIRIT: A sociological criticism of Literature, By *I. P. Calverton*. New York, Boni & Liveright, 1925.

Although revolutions in esthetics are due to revolutions in ideas, every revolution in ideas is a consequence of a revolution in the social structure that the prevailing material conditions have produced. Mr. Calverton's book is itself a prime illustration of this, its main thesis. A sociological interpretation of literature could not have appeared until the fruits of the industrial revolution had ripened into a new social system out of which in the course of time arose the nucleus of a new conception of life and its problems, a conception characterized by a recognition of the community as primary and the individual as derivative. To say this is not to belittle the author's achievement. The mere fact that a scholar lives in the world of today, in the midst of the societal heritage of modern industrialism, does not guarantee that his mind will apprehend the flow of the social forces. Thus so bold and insurgent a spirit as Spingarn could seriously transfer to America throbbing with industrialism the attenuated criticism of Croce with his notion that the only standard of art is the question whether the artist has accomplished what he aimed to accomplish. Such a detached and uncanny critique might be considered natural enough in a country like Italy, where society is sick to death with the attempt to carry on a strutting imperialism without a base in material resources and where consequently the competent literary genius needs to be self-sufficient and self-contained and to demand that he be judged by personal standards as might a lone man sitting on a submerged rock in a hopeless sea; but the fact that a learned American critic could presume to undertake the naturalization of so effete a standard in the United States with its exuberant material basis out of which grows an overpowering social organism is an indication of the length of time it takes for the material foundation to work its way up through social institutions into the mentality of an era. The time has long seemed ripe for such an epochal work as Calverton's with its illuminating presentation of the fact that the whole significance of art consists in its correspondence to the social forces, which are, in turn, to be referred to the alterations going on in the material foundations of livelihood and life; but no critic of literature rose to the occasion, unless we give rank to such works as Francke's "History of German Literature as Determined by Social Forces", or Vide Scudder's "Social Ideals in English Letters." These works opened the field for Americans, but they were, in a sense, premature. At any rate they did not serve to create a school of sociological criticism, although they were in themselves adequate to that end. The time, however, was not ripe. Material production had to evolve decades longer, and on the basis of its social institutions and usages had to develop new forms and new qualities. Now at last it would seem that we are ready for the rise of a con-

quering school of scientific criticism, sociological criticism, and it is apparent that Calverton has struck the key-note for the emergence of such a movement of dynamic interpretation.

Certain sophisticated sociologues are saying that there is nothing novel in the principles set forth in "The Newer Spirit". Certainly there is nothing new about them, nor does the author pretend that there is. The significant thing about the book is that it paves the way for the application of principles which ought to have been common stock in trade of literary criticism for the past generation, but which did not succeed in penetrating the sacred precincts of the litterateurs until there was time enough for Calverton to be born, to grow, to get education and experience, and to write a book. Plenty of others "could have done it," but the fact is that they didn't. Either they were sociologists unversed in letters or without sufficient time to give such outlying fields as art, or else they were literary men who ought to have felt the need of a mastery of the interpretation of social forces but didn't. Calverton's distinction is not that he has originated something; for according to his own thesis the individual originates nothing. It merely happens that he is serving as the first open channel through which the social development of the times finds it possible to push its way upward into the galleries of art criticism. Needless to say that the art work of the future will be creative about in proportion as it assimilates and consciously utilizes the sociological principles which the present book makes a beginning at expressing and applying. If there has been great literature produced in the present era, it has been due to a more or less unconscious apprehension of the influences that Calverton delineates. Now, however, that the hidden forces have been brought out into the open, writers can no longer depend on unconscious or subconscious hunches. Only as they proceed open-eyed on the background of the sociological interpretation will their work be better than an abortion.

The first chapter is the key to the book. In it the author shows how his thesis emerges from a study of the evolution of literature. Feudal society is passed in review with its artistic preoccupation with "noble characters". Shakespeare is noticed "because his works so excellently illustrate how the esthetic and ethical ideas of the feudal period were expressed in literature, and stand out in such sharp and striking contrast to the changing conceptions of later centuries." It appears that "as the bourgeois class, with the steady decline of feudalism, continued to rise . . . the aristocratic conception waned." During the period of unquestioned bourgeois ascendancy, "there could be but two kinds of ethical and esthetic conceptions, one dominant, the bourgeois, the other recessive or vestigial, the aristocratic." In more recent times civilization has been characterized by the rise of the proletarian, and the increase in the class-consciousness and class organization of this lowest level puts it more and more into a position to impress "itself upon the activity of a society" and to "function as a determinant of its basic conceptions." Walt Whitman illustrates this proletarian trend. A whole chapter is devoted to Sherwood Anderson as an outstanding current illustration of the same tendency, which does not imply the present maturation of a proletarian concept, a process that comes later in the development.

Chapter One indicates, further, that there exists an "indisseverable connection between the nature of literary technique and the stage of development of society". This conception is by no means novel. It was expounded a half-century ago by Posnett in his "Comparative literature", but little has been done since to develop the conception. Perhaps the most significant recent contribution to the subject prior to Calverton was Flinders Petrie's little book on the "Revolutions of Civilization". Now in Calverton the theory comes to life and promises to take hold in America. He remarks, for instance, that "the more carefully we notice the history of fiction . . . we are immediately impressed by the evolution from the impossible to the improbable, thence to the probable and finally to the inevitable." This trend was of course a natural result of man's increasing command of the scientific resources for the mastery of the conditions of life. The lingering of some of the older tendencies illustrates the principle that "the advance of a new social system though it achieved a change in the dominant esthetic and ethical ideas cannot hope to annihilate at once, or in a generation or two, all of the remains of those conceptions that have been forced to recede into the background."

A later chapter shows that social relativity is the ruling principle not merely in respect to the substance and the forms of art but also in the matter of esthetic values. It appears "that a work of art does not possess a positive or absolute value; that its value is impermanent, depending on the continuance of the environment that created it, and varies perceptibly with each change in social structure and imperceptibly with each change in immediate environment." In this connection the reviewer is tempted to use by way of illustration a dictum put forth by a foremost American professor of Education that "great literature is that which embodies the social spirit of its age and lends inspiration for social betterment." Little discernment is required in order to determine the conditions under which such standard of valuation might arise in the minds of the more thoughtful and then become the accepted canon of criticism. The student of social forces would not necessarily have to accept without qualification the professor's critique, but he would have to accept the general principle laid down by Calverton and to demand evidence of any human validity in the notion that art can have greatness irrespective of time and place and circumstance. Undoubtedly most of those who hold to such a detached standard are, in their appraisals of art products mistaking a wonder over the outlandish or a zest that comes merely from novel stimulation, for esthetic appreciation. Their criticism would have to be subjected to psychological analysis before they could prove it to be a pertinent case. Meanwhile Calverton's critique will hold.

The range of topics covered in "The Newer Spirit" leaves something to be desired in respect to unity, and yet such a remark is hardly to be taken as a criticism, any more than is recognition of the fact that the author has done no more than open the whole subject and suggest what a wealth of material lies before the prospector. It is well that the book was published at this time as an outline, a clue, a specimen, a guide. Too many scholars wait till they have rounded out a subject and put it into a formidably complete and logical arrangement before they admit the public to a view. Such practice is one of

the main explanations of the cultural lag, of the fact that it takes a generation or two for the prevalent ideas to change to fit a new material order and a new social situation. While ideas emerge and take hold so slowly, civilization is bound to be out-of-date. Consequently Calverton is to be congratulated for having the courage to publish while his ideas are still pretty general if not vague and sketchy if not crude. Reviewers who have attacked his work on this score on the ground that his selection of illustrations is sometimes inept merely betray their own scholasticism and pedantry. He has done a work that greatly needed to be done. His discussions of the points covered in this review as well as of "Morals and Determinism", "The Great Man Illusion", "The Rise of Objective Psychology" and other like topics should furnish the starting point for a galaxy of works in elaboration of his main thesis. Current articles in the "Modern Quarterly", of which Mr. Calverton is editor, give promise of forthcoming volumes of his own authorship. It is not too much to predict that he will become the founder of a school,—that we shall at last attain, in America, to a group of critics who will see art as a social product in a social setting and will uproot the naive, weird, fantastic, dilettante pedantry which characterizes the bulk of literary criticism in the United States at the present time.

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