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The Vanguard - Yesterday and Tomorrow.

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This Month In Books

The Vanguard—Yesterday and Tomorrow.

New Directions in Prose & Poetry, 1940.
New Directions, Norfolk, Conn.

What James Laughlin is doing as a publisher and editor for the younger generation of American writers cannot be too highly praised. Each year his catalogue offers a fine variety of first-rate literary material, and his yearly survey, *New Directions in Prose & Poetry*, is becoming a more and more representative vehicle of the articulate vanguard.

The output of 1940 is again generous in quantity and value—more than 600 pages, and yet excellent in format, pleasant to look at and pleasant to read.

The average person who ventures on perusing the voluminous inventory of a "striving generation," usually expects, with a sort of melancholy resignation, gross exaggerations and ambiguous images—wildly hysterical stuff, full of shrill indictment and tiresome self-pity. He will be surprised to find a more urbane and constructive attitude in this anthology. Isn't it odd and paradoxical? While the world turns mad, and the rank-and-file columnists give us the shivers with their apocalyptic rhetoric, the vanguard appears composed and politely reasonable.

It is neither odd nor paradoxical. For it is the vanguard's intrinsic function to be *different*; to oppose the norm; to debunk the worn-out slogans of yesterday, and to anticipate the formulas and fashions of the future.

During the first decades of this century, the vanguard, always revolution-

ary and iconoclastic, reacted violently against the stale positivism of the nineteenth century—its shallow cult of Progress, the hypocritical morals and the rationalistic boredom of a bourgeois society. It was this sweeping revolt against the nineteenth century which determined the style and the philosophy of the most advanced writers, thinkers and artists, from Strindberg, Wedekind and D. H. Lawrence to Oswald Spengler, Picasso and Gertrude Stein.

This playful rebellion "against civilization," stimulating and creative in the realm of art and literature, was already foreshadowing, or actually preparing, another event and major tribulation that was to take place on another plane. Paradoxically enough, the insurrection of creative minds against the drab materialism and hideous hypocrisy of modern life was instrumental in bringing about the revolution of nihilism, which is the potential destruction of everything man has thought, accomplished and cherished during thousands of years.

To glorify the chaos may be stimulating, as long as civilization is still intact. But with the revolution of nihilism devastating a continent and threatening the last citadels of decency and order everywhere, it behooves mature and responsible men to renounce all eccentricity and to participate, actively and humbly, in the well-intended efforts of those who want to defend this failing order by improving it, by propitiating and preparing its gradual transformation.

I take it as a promising sign that the problems and achievements of architecture—a constructive topic *par excellence*—assume so central a place in the composition of *New Directions*. The lucid and sober spirit that prevails in the remarks of Edgar Kaufmann Jr.

on The New Design and Public Acceptance, is *modern* in the most encouraging sense of the word, reasonably planned, confident, realistic, bare of orthodox hysteria or pretentious mannerism. The same is true of an impressive report on Bridgeport, Connecticut—"An analysis of Urbanism and the planning for it," made by five members of the Yale Graduate Group in Architecture.

There is in this anthology an unassuming seriousness, an honest awareness of responsibilities, both social and artistic, which is so often lacking in the literary products of the vanguard. This mood of earnest endeavor is apparent, even in some of the more playful experiments. Perhaps I ought to except the "chainpoems," a new "intellectual sport" invented and described by Mr. Charles Henri Ford: "After writing his line . . . the poet forwards the MS to the next on the list (which has been drawn up in advance by whoever starts the chainpoem), together with the list itself, and so the chainpoem resolves to completion." It's probably lots of fun for a bunch of poets or inspired amateurs sitting together for an evening. The results, however, are rather feeble. I cannot but wonder—as Mr. Bishop does in his bright introduction to the chainpoem department—"why, in this year of 1940, in the midst of a war in which the conquerors have left nothing conceivable to chance, in which the exact methods have been adopted to promote a brutal triumph, why should so many poets have collaborated on a work from which discipline has been deliberately discarded and which, if it is to succeed, can only do so by the happiest of hazards?"

It has to be said that, in general, the poetry in this anthology falls short of the prose. The most impressive poem

is, in my opinion, *Babel: 1940*, by Eugène Jolas. *Babel: 1940*—that is the nightmarish vision of a civilization stripped of its common faith, laws and language. The incommunicability of the human idioms—God's curse and punishment to man for the sacrilegious scandal of his arrogance—becomes the terrific symbol of a total disintegration of all human standards and values.

*Twelve radios blast with jungle-
speeches
Together in a baragouin of despairing
insurrections
They shrill lascivious yawps through
the air
In the saintless chants of the aggressors . . .*

In the end, there is a great fear and sadness; but there is also a hope, though it can only be expressed as a timid question:

*Toutes les ballades sont mortes
And we wonder in our deepest dream
Will the vocabularies never cease
clashing
Werden die Wörterbücher immer
streiten
Will the bicker-words never grow silent
In the elegy of a great love
Will the liturgical word never come
again
With the choral of the frontierless
voices
In the resurrection of the sacred
tongue*

The resurrection of the sacred tongue: A young American, Paul Goodman, has a less mystic designation for the same ultimate hope. Calmly and confidently, he begins his Utopian story, *A Ceremonial*, with the following words: "A breezy May morning (not long after the establishment among us of reasonable institutions) . . ."

There are no bombastic descriptions

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as to the nature of those "reasonable institutions." He just tells us what happens and what is said in a solemn afternoon hour on May Ninth—of what year? It may be very close, or very far away. Next spring, or a spring in a hundred years from now.

However, the air will be magically transparent, and there will be speeches and music—Beethoven's long quartet, opus 130 in B-flat major—and when music and speeches are over there is "the pure daylight of the beginning of evening," and then, high over the hill, gleams the star Venus, "afterthought of the Sun." All things, and the words and gestures of men, seem transfigured in an atmosphere of serenity and solemn elegance. The general mood is one of pensive joy—a spirit akin to that of a person slowly recuperating from a virulent disease.

The poet visualizes a period of social peace following our era of disintegration. Instead of the hideous detonations of bombs and the clamorous lies of propaganda, there is the comforting lucidity of fine music, the measured dialogues of wise men, and the cheerful laughter of youth.

Just what is new in May Ninth (it is as old as music and science!) is the unique coupling of fastidiousness and love. And yes! to my mind—as evening fell on the first May Ninth, and the planet Hesperus was in the sky, there was most of love.

The tone of this young American voice reminds me, admitting the infinite differences in style and scope, of certain venerable accents long-known and ever-loved—the accents of Goethe's mellow wisdom and fatherly confidence. Indeed, the spirit of this Ceremonial, the spirit of Architecture and the Liturgical Word; this synthetic pathos which reconciles and embraces the antithesis between "revolutionary" and "conserva-

tive," Faith and Reason, foreshadows the saving message of a coming Humanism.

Goodman's contribution is by far the most remarkable and most promising one this anthology offers. The same artistic conscientiousness, however, and the zealous concern with the intrinsic human problems, is noticeable in some of the other essays and stories as well. I feel this pathos of responsibility—the earnest striving of a professional artist for the maximum of formal perfection—in the *Notes on Writing* by Katherine Anne Porter. How touching and characteristic it sounds when she starts a letter from Berlin (in December, 1931): "My poem as I look at it this morning is not so good as I hoped." There is sympathy and a broad knowledge of human things in the melancholy wit and the ironic nonchalance of Weldon Kees' nicely readable prose, and I recognize these qualities also in George Orwell's penetrating style. His analysis of Henry Miller's work is undoubtedly the most accomplished and most thorough essay contribution. Yet, his merciless examination of contemporary conditions, both spiritual and social, seems somehow tainted by a certain immoderate bitterness and arrogant despair, which pretends to be "realistic" but is really as extravagantly exaggerated as the following statement Mr. Orwell makes about Mr. Miller's novel, *Tropic of Cancer*: "Here in my opinion is the only imaginative prose-writer of the slightest value who has appeared among the English-speaking people for some years past."

X Orwell's radical criticism, however, has constructive elements, for all its ill-tempered aggressiveness. The only department in *New Directions* where a really macabre anarchism prevails, is a very elaborate anthology of *Values*

in *Surrealism*. Mr. Laughlin, in his Preface, has a rather apologetic manner of presenting this particular feature of his literary parade. He says expressly that he does not approve of Surrealism, but on the other hand hopes that "it will not be kicked around as a dead body that has no further use." I agree with him that all truly poetical tendencies and experiments have a signal value and important function nowadays in counterbalancing the humdrum soap-box style of the "leftist-realist school." Nevertheless, I cannot help feeling that the visions of Franz Kafka, Jean Cocteau, Julien Green, and some others, are more authentic and significant than the at once pedantic and chaotic program of M. André Breton, founder and leader of the Surrealist movement. In fact, I consider it a mistake to include a lengthy survey of Surrealism in an anthology of new directions in America. For Surrealism is not dead enough to be discussed as a purely historical phenomenon; nor is it really alive.

Undoubtedly, the editor of the Surrealist department—Nicolas Calas, a young Greek poet who has lived in Paris—has done an excellent job. Here they are, neatly and methodically compiled: the pre-Surrealists, the real Surrealists, and the post-Surrealists. We are informed that among Breton's forerunners were Saint Joan (*The Apocalypse: Surrealist in philosophy*), Charlie Chaplin, and the German poet Hölderlin—*Surrealist in his madness and through Empedocles* . . .

There is an unbearable pretension—an infantile and shocking arrogance in this tactic of "assigning" certain figures of the past, or even of the present, to the weird hierarchy of the Surrealist club. For some shady reason the Marquis de Sade and Leon Trotsky enjoy

supreme honors in this ghostly organization. I wonder what may be the intellectual link between the hyper-individualistic philosophy of the murderous Marquis and the rigid materialism of the Russian Marxist, whom Mr. Calas calls "the most titanic figure of our time." It is the same Calas who, when asked what consequences the Surrealist philosophy would have on social morality, replied, cheerfully and bluntly: "Who cares about social morality?" It seems questionable if Leon Trotsky would have appreciated saucy *bonmots* of this sort. I don't.

How stale and yet provocative this whole attitude has become, this irresponsible pell-mell of Marxism and romanticism, Schizophrenia and publicity, puerile monkey-business and morbid inspiration, distorted Freudianism and phoney eccentricity . . . I am afraid that Herbert J. Muller is only too correct when he says:

In Hitler's world, we cannot afford to pass over the obvious charge: although the Surrealists pride themselves on fighting against "all forms of reaction," insist upon a "transformation of the world" in the name of liberty, they are actually in line of the most profoundly reactionary movement of the day, and chiefly exploit the dark powers that enslave man.

Yes, they are in line with yesterday's frustrated, treacherous avant-garde. In line with Signor Marinetti, that aging buffoon who degenerated to a garrulous lackey of a blood-stained tyranny; in line with Ezra Pound, who lowered himself to the degree of broadcasting as an American Lord Haw-Haw for a collapsing impostor, Signor Mussolini; in line with all those German "expressionists" who used to tickle us with their diabolic jokes and were so quick in becoming obedient followers of the *Führer*.

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I don't suggest, to be sure, that André Breton, as an individual, has the wish to make his peace with the brutal powers of retrogression. In fact, his personal integrity is beyond any doubt, as is, by the way, the intensity of his talent. But this does not alter the fact that Surrealism as a movement is nothing but a dubious, if startling concoction of all those anti-rationalistic literary and artistic tendencies which I called before "the playful rebellion against civilization." Breton and his spectacular crowd were, indeed, the pretentious heirs of Dada, Futurism, and Expressionism, whom they survived for half a decade or so. But now all this is over.

Mr. Calas informs us that "Paris, needless to say, is no more a center of Surrealist activity," which sounds hardly surprising. The truth is, however, that "Surrealist activity" had virtually ceased even before the Huns invaded the *Ile de France*. There were not many left of Breton's followers: the master was abandoned by his most faithful friends. The purest spirit and most lovable character among them, René Crevel, committed suicide, leaving on his chaotic desk this terrible note: *Je suis dégoûté de tout . . .*: his cruel farewell to the movement and to the world. Louis Aragon renounced all apocalyptic eccentricities and joined the disciplined family of Little Father Stalin. So did Paul Eluard, the poet, whom his Surrealist pals had called *the nurse of stars*. Philippe Soupault proved an able journalist and versatile official of the Third Republic. Salvador Dali, "relentless young Catalan painter . . . and theoretician (paranoiac-critical methods) for Surrealism" (according to Mr. Calas' bizarre "Dictionary") took to window-dressing, window-smashing and other prosperous and spectacular

occupations. Others are dead or scattered over the world.

André Breton's plight is tragic. With all his uncanny skill and fervent energy he created nothing that has lasting life. Now, he is alone, frustrated and sterile—most alarmingly threatened by those evil forces which he too long fostered, if only unwittingly.

He still has friends, and I hope wholeheartedly that they may succeed in helping and saving him. At the same time, however, I wish that they would renounce their efforts to transplant Surrealism to this country.

Mr. Calas has little doubt that Americans will respond to Surrealism "as Europeans have." Melville and Poe, he says, are "Pre-Surrealists"; moreover, he claims, "in a sense as Surrealist, Barnum and his circus, so much more interesting than the decadent Russian ballet."

This faithful emissary and talented disciple of a muddled high-priest takes it, then, for granted that the coming culture of America is to be a stunning combination of Baudelaire and Cecil de Mille—the morbid ecstasies of the Parisian *fin de siècle* presented with Barnum's glaring hullabaloo. The Venus de Milo with the features of Sarah Bernhardt and adorned with the tail of some submarine monster, parading in Madison Square Garden to the tune of a colossal orchestra executing Susa's most dashing march: What a picture! How breathtaking! How absurd!

Happily, this is not the New Direction whose shape emerges from James Laughlin's valuable collection. It contains a few pieces of excellent writing and also some less exciting material. However, what makes this book significant is, in my opinion, its *moral* climate, which guarantees and determines its esthetic standards. These young

writers have turned away from the fanaticism of political orthodoxies and, simultaneously, have overcome the sinister attraction of a chaotic nihilism. The air we breathe is refreshing; it will tear asunder the ghastly apparitions created by hysteria, snobbery and despair.

Klaus Mann