THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

HARVEY O'HIGGINS'S "DISTINGUISHED AMERICANS"

By Edward H. Reede

Dr. Reede's review is the second of a series of longer book reviews to be published each month in THE BOOKMAN. *The books discussed will not necessarily be new nor will they be books which have never before been reviewed in the magazine. The aim of the editors is to present, in the selection of volumes and reviewers, articles which shall constitute solid pieces of criticism.*

IN the exercise of the gift of creative expression, the artist is the last person in the world to confess that he is a propagandist. Yet, it is difficult in the pursuit of beauty and truth to restrain the index finger from indicating the quarry. And, at that moment of indication, the artist becomes the propagandist.

Mr. O'Higgins would least of all accept the appellation of evangelist, and yet what he presents is a gospel of character. To him the good story is the old Anglo-Saxon godspell or story of truth. Whistler could not refrain from emphasizing line, nor Tintoretto color, nor Angelo fluid energy, and in this measure, they proselyted.

Obviously Mr. O'Higgins aspires to be an artist of character. To him, character is a kind of beauty, it is a sort of diamond for which the artist performs the task of detaching it from its matrix so that it stands out with light on all sides of the rhomb. For him the cutting process has already been performed by nature, the polishing has been accomplished by circumstance, and there is left but the task of pivoting it in unshadowing light. To him the diamond is meant not only for beauty but for the fundamental purpose of cutting into the glassy surface of reality. He sees the point of contact of character with reality as the apex of a pyramid which moves with its base and body from a total past against the decisive present. Every gesture is for this moment a final gesture, every word a decisive word. The very self of the man is at the moment contained in this present apex of an enduring past. The man lives in pin points. Here is no symphony, rather a discord from which ring dominating tones which arrest the ear. If there are overtones, make the most of them — Mr. O'Higgins is not called on to preach their æsthetics.

In contrast with the literature which presents character in facets, where the present reality is but a spotlight bringing out rare beauty or secret flaw, Mr. O'Higgins's technique causes disquietude. It is the technique of an ironist. It demands an ironical audience and this audience grows slowly among us. We are accustomed to view our beauty and truth either in sentimental galleries where we protect them by ten foot hand rails, or in naturalistic laboratories under a compound Zeiss lens. We have never been able to blend the perspective of beauty with the proximity of truth. In the movies we demand an anamorphoscopic lens.

The ironist is always in danger of being mistaken for a satirist, of seeming to demand derisive laughter as evidence of appreciation. Quite the opposite, his art is a tragic art, but the tragedy is subjective in the audience rather than in the object. The audience becomes a tragic audience when the weight of truth overbears the lift of beauty. The ironist bears beauty in one hand, truth in the other, yet keeps an even balance on the tightrope of life. He can even toss his weight from one hand to the other without claiming that a pound of leaden truth outweighs a pound of feathery sentiment. The ironist, himself, feels that life is more hard work than tragedy. He greets his illusions with tongue in cheek but that does not mean vocable derision. He can look at more than cut flowers, and bears no prejudice toward earth clinging roots.

Character, to Mr. O'Higgins, has a fibred nobility. He does not lose his admiration of the crested oak because it has been dragged through the mud of the logging camp. He does not have to shut his eyes until it appears with the polish of the cabinet shop. And finally, he is saying to his reader, this is the stuff of life, it is only with this kind of material that any man can do anything. It is only with this kind of stuff that any man, anywhere, has ever done anything. If you can mold beauty from it, it has been done; if you carve ugliness out of it, that too has been done. The only true use of mind is to do what you do with the courage to bear the reward or the penalty of clear eyed choice. It is the only hope of escape from muddled sentimentalism and muddier naturalism.

In "Some Distinguished Americans" Mr. O'Higgins presents certain diamond clear characters which have fused their content in the matrix of American society. They are as many-sided as any human rhombohedron and yet at any given moment they have but one cutting edge.

Modern psychology has proved that man has but one adequate outlet of energy against his environment and that is the motor path. That there is only one fundamental purpose of the human being and that is action. Throw as many motives as you please into the hopper of impulse and yet only one can control the one way rails of action. Always the final act is "a breath ahead of the wind" of other impulses. We lose sight of this in reading Dostoyevsky and sink in a swamp of ambivalency and ambitendency where we mistake motive for act. Mr. O'Higgins is a psychologist of act. The gesture is supreme to him. Whatever commotion goes on beneath the surface, the hand which lifts Excalibur above the lake is a single hand and the weapon is single pointed. All his skill is exerted to give a stereoscopic view of gesture.

For one thing, at least, we should be grateful to Mr. O'Higgins: he is not content to say that a tungsten lamp, a trolley car, or an electric percolator is simply an expression of repressed electrons. Any one of his stories can be reduced to the Freudian formula if the seeker for such finality so desires. But life seems to him something more, so far as appreciable content goes, than mere *élan vital.* Life cannot be shown in terms imperceptive to the reader. A certain biological myopia has developed in the race which renders mere amœbic chemiotaxis unacceptable as a motive of literature. Chemiotaxis is untranslatable in any terms which the average man can apply to his acceptance of the presidency of the Rotary Club or of the Authors' Guild.

The universally unconscious motive of life is one which by its terms is unknown to any. It is not a material for use in the fictional representation of life. It at once makes life unknowable. Any subconscious motive practicable for literary use must at least have its peak in consciousness. A man must be able to find at least a raveling in himself which will lead into the catacombs of his unthought. A usable repressed sex motive should portray its substitution in the working act and at the same time retain enough sensory tinge to lead to recognition by the reader as if in himself. Otherwise it remains for all time unrecognized and unrecognizable. For him, in his reality, it is as if it were not. It remains purely the material for the psychopathologist.

In "Some Distinguished Americans" we have a series of struggles between character and reality. Character forms out of many warring impulses, attempts to make terms with a reality which has but one protocol — unconditional action — and in its attempt throws out byproducts of fact and fancy. The products, the fruits of human life, become of value to society or do not, but are all that residues from the man living on the earth. The tragedy, if a tragedy is contained in these stories, is that society, which man unconsciously, through predetermination of nature, lives in and for, remains blind to the possible value of its several component parts — the energic possibilities of its individuals.

Genius is born, develops greatness through weakness, has heroic dreams, trickles puny acts, or reversely develops weakness through greatness, muses poltroonly, and overturns empires. Only social values remain, yet when does society attempt really to add a cubit to its stature? And always its one Cyclopean eye is being gouged by some doughty Ulysses.

A certain unpremeditated greatness drips from the dead and gone husks of all the people of O'Higgins. It lies not in what they wished but in what they did. Perhaps it is only here that greatness lies. Few of those dead and gone Americans whom we justly now call great, visioned this greatness as they looked back through the vistas of dead days. Like autumn leaves the path was strewed with dead grandeurs and drifting trivialities.

The dreams of Henri Anthon lived only as they were structuralized by the hands of others. Against reality his puny hands struggled with an unconquerable protagonist. And yet as energy, his impress remained upon the face of things as they are. Defeated, yes, and personally conquered, but something undefeatable drifted on the face of the waters beneath which he sank, unmarked.

The acts of Big Dan Reilly could never bend reality to the form which he could happily accept, and he too passed defeated. Yet he had woven a something of social texture between man and man with whom he had his being that persisted and had substance and value. He too left social values drifting above his abyss.

And Mrs. Murchison you would say was totally defeated, objectively and subjectively. Perhaps, but still she remains one of those unconscious martyrs to the law who have served to awaken suddenly the legal conscience of the race to the fact that the criminal may be a sick person and that some prisons should be hospitals for the socially unwell if we are to fulfil an ideal.

In Warden Jupp we have the unconscious philanthropist, the man who

out of the trivialities of his sordid complexes produces societal sublimities, values so great that society in its wisdom should protect him from his own ignorance. But his existence today depends upon his agility in building a hobby horse for faddists to ride on. Always he is in danger of being tried by society and found wanting because he knows not what he does.

And poor old P. Q., the type of piloried "predatory rich", striving in his blind and wholly human way to keep his own head above the slough of inferiority, and like Samson pulling down the pillars of societal scorn on his shoulders. His hobnails of defensive arrogance continually leave wounds of social injustice, yet in his heart he is a lover of society in a society where that which is most greatly desired is most stoutly shut away and sealed up. Still his impress stands today, and in the ridges of his Gargantuan finger prints pigmies live.

Helmuth, too, passed and gone, but not before he had done what no man hitherto had done. Other men have carried the fruit of his creative genius into a wave of scientific progress which has benefited more individuals than the work of all the others in this book. Yet how trivial the content of his life to him. Indeed, as Mr. Whitney sees it, a terrier shaken to death by a mouse.

In Vance Cope, Mr. O'Higgins, beyond the details of the inexorableness of character formation, suddenly sheds the illumination of the secret of character transformation. Man is the slave of his symbols, his responses are abject before his stimuli. By will power he wins not an inch nor the ten thousandth part of an inch. But reverse his symbols, true up his perceptions, and suddenly his prison doors fly open. And somewhat as if in a psychological laboratory, Mr. O'Higgins, step by step, shows how the control of the symbol controls character. Pinch hitting for intellect, Mr. O'Higgins suggests, the intelligent correction of perception desymbolizes the symbol, releases the instincts from infantile byways, and introduces them to the joyous highroad of normality.

This book is valuable to whoever is disposed to take heart from reviewing the trivialities of his own past, and reminds one of the old Second Reader aphorism that "great oaks from little acorns grow". Those who still renew their youth through Napoleonic field glasses will find small blessing in it. It seems a natural use of such psychological material as is fitted for the portrayal of the conflict between man and his circumstances.

Some Distinguished Americans. By Harvey O'Higgins. Harper and Bros.