THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

HUGH WALPOLE'S "CATHEDRAL"

By Joseph Hergesheimer

Mr. Hergesheimer's review is the first 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 an age which invariably takes seriously the wrong thing none has been so misapprehended as the novel. It is persistently spoken of as a new form, an affair without antecedents or tradition or symmetry, less elevated than the lyric and not so profound as an essay. What is profound in this is the nonsense! The novel is as old as the first pictorial scratches on stone, it is as old as desire and imagination, longing and failure; it is one, in fine, with the beginnings of humanity. The novel is a story, nothing more, an arrangement of motives and acts — in such a manner as to be intelligible — for the purpose of entertainment. Nothing in the world more! All the solemn and pretentious and hypocritical phrases and terms uttered about it, all the surveys and comparisons, are ridiculously beside the novel's first and only necessity — it must be entertaining and the rest, whatever it is, may follow.

An incredible amount of absurdity has gathered about the arts — painting and music and sculpture and literature and architecture and the others, which have slipped from my mind. Things that are necessary, of course, such as houses, are first made practicable and then, with time, beautiful, and the quality of beauty in addition to use is a quality of art. Life itself is an amazing spectacle; and, usually at the ends of epochs, there are men who can give permanence, in stone or words or paint, to a fluid humanity, who can make it clear for all the future generations, and they are artists. But it must be carefully understood that their purpose is not one of record, they have no gaze of responsibility upon the future — that is responsible for itself — no, their concern is with the immediate present. They are putting their own time, or their reactions to other times, into a medium no more, in essence, than a common carrier.

This is particularly true of the novel, which is a relation of events for the benefit of an audience, and it is a detail whether that relation is by mouth, by music, or in written words. The form is unimportant. The business of the story teller is to tell a story, not the same story to all people, but one appropriate to the teller and his audience. The story was first and the whole body of critical dissertation and discovery came after; and, very much like the lianas of tropical jungles, they hid and choked their parent or supporting stem. The vocabulary of the arts is

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a stupid game that a number of solemn people have, for their own good, agreed to play; it means nothing — that is, nothing outside itself — subjected to any simplicity of query. Even such a simple and fundamental distinction as the difference between a romantic and a realistic art has never been established. It has been guessed at, disagreed about, but no more.

For these reasons I approach critical declarations with suspicion; I find myself, against every intention, using words that have no meaning to me, falling into pretentious and lying sentences, losing every trace of that simplicity which it is my secret and vain ambition to accomplish. I shouldn't, for example, have written this paper but for my fondness for Hugh Walpole; I should not have approached it at all but for the violent prejudice I have in his favor. Unlike the critic, I do not have to be noble, I can associate, in fact and in print, with the men and women I prefer; and, wherever people will listen, I can shamelessly proclaim their virtues.

It is a fortunate thing, here, that Mr. Walpole is a novelist, for a novelist and his novel are one, nothing can disentangle or separate them, one cannot be measured or praised aside from the other. I mean, of course, that the essential in the novelist is like his essential novel; and that, in Mr. Walpole, could hardly be better — he has humor and the qualities of the heart and, unlike me, he has no prejudices, nothing that is life is condemned by him. He is big and fine on the surface and beautifully dressed, he is at once big and sensitive, a combination beyond improvement. And, because of all this, even when I don't like a novel he has written I like it far better than a great many novels which I like. Nothing, certainly, could be clearer than that. It is, however, relatively unimportant; happily in a pursuit where only the good has any actuality, at his best he is authentic and undeniable.

That tenderness for singular characters, so obviously part of an older manner of story writing, Mr. Walpole is getting more and more to be without; the feeling that, while the mass moves on, human particles drop, unimportantly, is stronger in "The Cathedral" than in any of his previous books. He may, perhaps, deny this to me, for he is a link in a chain reaching back from the present; but exactly that is happening to him.

"The Cathedral", then, is not a character novel; the story does not depend on the sentimental or bitter projection of an individual, but has to do generally with people lost together on a whirling atom of fiery substance. It is about the church but it is not religious; the English clergy, clergymen at all failed to interest me until I read "The Cathedral"; but throughout its pages I was fascinated by the affairs of the church, I could scarcely wait to discover who would get the appointment to Pybus St. Anthony. Against that paramount decision both Brandon and Ronder were lost sight of; and my feeling in this was as it should be, for that appointment, finally, was bigger than either or both of the men, it absorbed and owned and infinitely harmed them. The Archdeacon it killed but the hurt to Canon Ronder was more secret and — though it didn't destroy his physical rotundity — perhaps even more fatal.

Archdeacon Brandon's defeat, the last bravery of his creed flung without effect against the obduracy of a new and unsympathetic dispensation,

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his heart's failure and death, has a breath of courage forever denied to Ronder's perversity of motives and power. But, in Mr. Walpole, there is no discrimination against Ronder, actually the Canon lives and the Archdeacon dies . . . it would not have fallen like that in the novel of yesterday.

"The Cathedral", then, is his best; it is Hugh Walpole, big, with a fine surface, and beautifully clothed; it is that rare thing today — rare in the comparatively young — a splendid Anglo-Saxon novel. Whatever may lie ahead of that race and that tradition it is still strong in Mr. Walpole; he is a part of England exactly as John Masefield is utterly English; and both come at the end of an epoch. The easy thing, of course, is to say that "The Cathedral" follows the spirit of Anthony Trollope; that is more obvious, more superficial, than true; but it would be correct to say that they belong to the same spirit. "The Cathedral" is disarming — on the surface it has small trace of absolute modernity, it seems to be bound into its tradition, more retrospective in form than advanced; but examine it carefully:

Follow the love story of Falk Brandon and Annie Hogg — nothing could be more traditional than the meeting of a gentleman and the daughter of the inn keeper by a romantic stream. There is the elopement to London . . . but an immediate marriage and then silence. At no moment does Falk understand Annie's attraction for him, and Annie is skeptical and deliberate and cool. The truth is — since an art can never at bottom resemble life — that Falk and Annie, seen at last with a relative clarity, exist as part of the history of Falk's father, Archdeacon Brandon. A page in the Archdeacon's life, Mr. Walpole understands, is more significant to his audience and day than a volume of romantic and fateful elopements.

On the surface "The Cathedral" is, again, a record of the perpetual dying of the past, the destruction of the past by the present; it would be possible, on that plane, to write a very profound study of the thematic structure of the novel. I might follow, with immense discernment, the symbolical importance of the Cathedral, now a vast interior of shuddering gloom and then a dominating fateful bulk against a burning sky; I could show it taking life into the coldness of its stone; but that would be — I have the strongest conviction — superficial; it would multiply vanity and be concerned with personal show.

The inner, the fundamental, fact about "The Cathedral" is that it is an admirable story; in spite of its apparent diversity of ends it is a simple story; anyone capable of reading may follow it to its beautiful end — a man in the pomp of high public circumstance and power is ruined by a seemingly modest individual. In the beginning the Archdeacon is up and Canon Ronder down and at the end the Canon is up and Brandon destroyed.

I had said that the Archdeacon was the principal in "The Cathedral", but there are times when the interest, the anxiety, of the reader is wholly delivered to Frederick Ronder; and in that the skill, the purpose, of the story teller is revealed. The moment the Canon appears in Polchester he is significant, and this in spite of the fact that he is almost casually described as a man of a quite genial roundness, round of body and of spectacles. He is, apparently, eager to be no more than comfortable, to propiti-

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ate life and men; but at once his innocence is enveloped in darkness, at once the reader fears him . . . because of an art which shows the aunt who is his companion fearing him. At once Archdeacon Brandon is brought into the story on the very pinnacle of his glory, a pinnacle, seemingly, as high and fixed as the utmost high thrust of the Cathedral, and beside him Ronder, with all his unpredictable qualities and hidden power, is thrust modestly into the scene.

All else that happens, settings and avocations and beliefs and philosophies, are subservient to a struggle which is the mirror of a larger and, at bottom, impersonal affair; I mean that in Brandon and Ronder other men, a measure of universality, are present; but that is there because the individuals are seen in relation to their purpose in "The Cathedral", a novel. Mr. Walpole is not a sentimentalist about the individual, he understands that an individual is not of very great importance in his or herself — this is clear in his treatment of Annie Hogg — and, I believe, he realizes that one man is not very different from another, one women's being from another's.

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