

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

THE ABUNDANT LIFE

By Irwin Edman

ONE approaches a work entitled "The Creative Spirit" with something of misgiving. Under the protection of that beautiful phrase there has been too often, to quote a phrase also quoted by Mr. Brown, "the shimmer of high aspiration and extraordinary nonsense". In the name of that seductive ideal there has been a vast amount of foolish sentimentalism and of footless ecstasy. Mr. Brown's book is nothing of the sort. It is an extraordinarily sensible and solid inquiry into the conditions of American life which make for and against that spontaneous and self disciplined adventure we call creative activity.

In his introductory chapter Mr. Brown indulges in a procedure that might well be more often followed by those high priests of unction who talk loosely and breathlessly about the mysteries of art — he makes perfectly clear just what he is talking about. In prose which, if not distinguished, is distinguished by impeccable clarity, Mr. Brown reminds us what creative activity is, and in what sense it is life most alive. We are creative — and happy — in those moments and those doings when we are spontaneously and significantly reshaping things, situations, and our own emotions into something fresh and original, and something bearing, so to put it, our own signature. It is the kind of activity precisely the opposite of that illustrated by a machine. In his analysis Mr. Brown emphasizes the element of emotional verve which is the origin, the intellec-

tual freshness which is the essence, and the spontaneous glow which accompanies and is the reward of creative action.

In so far as we are heightened and inventive in our doings — whether in industry, art, or social relations — we are artists. And, as Mr. Brown points out, only in so far as we have that heightening and inventiveness in our actions have we anything resembling positive and continual happiness. That touch of freedom and originality which is the mark of genius exists, to some degree, in all except imbeciles. But that potential electric of the spirit demands healthy conditions for its release, and where there is no release or opportunity there is frustration and spiritual death.

Mr. Brown's inquiry is twofold. He makes clear that life is fruitful and rewarding only where its temper is creative, and he finds American institutions by and large guilty of stifling such life. He begins with the church. Religion, through the ministry of the church, might contribute to the quickening of emotion, the revelation of new depths, the incitement to new reaches and new adventures of the spirit. But the church, like any other institution, has become professional, standardized, and institutional. The church building which might be a tangible and vivifying house of beauty is too often a drab meeting house. The minister who might be an interpreter and awakener of the life of the spirit has become an official, a lecturer and a social lion. The same is true of education. The teacher has become in most of our colleges and universities a

cog in a system and an instrument in a hierarchy. He is engaged in rushing masses of standardized students through standard materials without friction and without fire. The students have become so many human units to be inhumanly diplomaed via so many credits for so many hours in so many courses. That enriching and freeing experience in cooperative thought and imagination which is truly education, they never have. It is possible neither to teacher nor to student in a system where the letter and the machinery have taken the place of the spirit and the man.

One by one, Mr. Brown ticks off the institutions which constitute the conditioning environment of American life. In none of them is the creative spirit nurtured, fortified, and freed. He recites with justice the oft quoted charges against industry. For better or for worse, the industrial system has come to stay. And with it have come grueling monotony, meaningless mechanism, and life quenching standardization.

The routine of industry has dominated not simply the work in the factory but the private life of the factory worker. It has made him live in a pattern house in a company street. It has narrowed him to the buying of standardized goods and subjected him to the insidious tyranny and death of standardized amusements. It has turned him into a machine no less fatal and clockwork than the machine he operates. These charges are terrible — and familiar — and true. It is a tribute to Mr. Brown's skill that he should make them sound with a fresh terror in our ears.

Mr. Brown's indictment of science has a more novel ring. Science indeed might be expected to be one of the most generous and liberating elements in the

modern world. It has given us a sense of scrupulous and disinterested method, of imaginative reach and of beautiful and cosmic suggestion. But Mr. Brown shows how science has come to mean for the many only the synonym for a deadly and mechanistic materialism. And he shows also how remote to the experience of the average is the spirit of scientific method, that fertile and free and disciplined adventure of the mind.

Mr. Brown piles up the particulars of his indictment with quiet and unpassioned exactness. He has no special propaganda or bright particular solution. His book is simply a healthy emphasis of the fact that where there is no freedom of action there is no spirit, and where there is no creation there is no life. He is pointing to that survey of American life and the possible reconstruction in which there will be a soil wherein the creative spirit may flourish. He indicates briefly but suggestively the directions in which that reconstruction will occur.

It will mean, in the first place, that if industrial work cannot be less mechanical, there will at least have to be a chance for each workman to have some inventive and individual craft of his own. It will mean that art will have to cease to be something locked in museums, the refuge of the world weary, and the byplay of the wealthy. The spirit of creation is more hopefully found in those community theatres, those enterprises in music and in poetry and drama, where art is an experience shared and practised by normal, fullblooded, and normally free human beings.

Mr. Brown is pleading in essence for a consideration of what we may do in America to provide the conditions for genuine individuality, the play of personality on its own materials in the re-

shaping of its own world. This ideal of life as fine and free art involves, as Mr. Brown seems to see, a radical overhauling of our established prejudices and routine institutions. Mr. Brown does not look to any magic to transform our world. He has simply and successfully tried to define where our *Kultur* falls short of being alive, in order that we may turn to seek life more abundant. He has done an excellent and necessary job.

The Creative Spirit. By Rollo Walter Brown. Harper and Brothers.