Background Without Tradition

A Son of the Middle Border. By Hamlin Garland. Macmillan; $1.60.

Mr. Garland, in this story of his own life, seems hardly to be writing a confession, unless it be a confession—or rather avowal—of faith. He does not read like a man who has anything to recant or even abate; he lays down his cards very assuredly; he gives the reader, without reserve, not a finished and consequently more or less inscrutable product, but himself the artist, together with the material of his art. He presents the Middle Border with both vivid particularization and panoramic completeness of view; he has a filially sensitive eye for the menace and rigor of the frontier as well as for its splendor and charm. He sets himself before the reader with detachment—the actual detachment of time, for he stops his narrative at his thirty-first or thirty-second year. The picture is a large and broad one, occasionally too sardonic in its fidelity to fact.

Mr. Garland is inevitably, of course, the historian of his own consciousness, so far as he can call back the materials of it; and he recovers even from the dimness of his fourth year the memory of a midsummer evening and the rescue by his mother of a "poor, shrieking little tree toad" from the jaws of a long and wicked snake. The finer, certainly the more pleasing, parts of this history are those devoted to childish and boyish impressions; these memories are "of the fibre of poetry," unshadowed by the preoccupation which clings too closely to the author's mature consciousness—the preoccupation of the "man who has been there," the "competent witness," who is determined to set forth the "enforced misery of the pioneer." The prairie landscapes, "the radiant slopes of grass," "the brant and geese pushing their arrowy lines straight into the north," "the cloudless, glorious Maytime skies," "transcendent sunsets," "the fields that run to the world's end," "the fairy forest" of the wheat—all the fair things of nature are inimitably done. And there are numberless brief but adequate etchings of childhood: rich harvests of nuts and berries, bold explorations of the wilderness, breathless climbing of tall trees for grapes, the soldier pride of standing sentinel over new sown grain to guard it from wild pigeons. Whenever he speaks of these things, Mr. Garland's voice carries with the excellent timbre of romance.

But the convictions of the "man who has been there" assert themselves apace. Even his memories of "the twelve year old son of a Western farmer" frequently become memories of unremitting toil and desperate fatigue; and he speaks emphatically of his seventeen year old bitterness when his family moved from town back into the country. The farm even then had become to him the synonym for loneliness, dirt, and drudgery. That note in his theme continually gathers burden as he proceeds; avowedly it becomes his theme; it is clearly the source of the emotionalization not only of this but of all his work. His friends apparently found it necessary to warn him against the violence of his truth-telling; and the reader of this autobiography and of much of his other work will probably say that they advised him well, for while his art has become neither satire nor caricature, it smells of vengeance. Indeed from this admirable picture, both panoramic and detailed, which the author spreads out, the reader derives the contradictory impressions not only of the splendor and poetic suggestion of the

frontier itself, but also of the wretchedness, the pain, the futile inadequacy of life on the frontier. One cannot, however, infer from this wretchedness and inadequacy any inferiority in the individuals who lead such wretched lives; these pioneers may be more or less unlettered, but there can be no dispute as to the rugged power of the men or the strength and beauty of the women. It is the corrosive monotony, the loneliness, the blank unending labor, the bleak conditions of life that so preoccupy the author's mind. And perhaps the unsuspected element which, for the purposes of art, makes this wretchedness doubly tawdry, is the fact that it is raw and new; it has no tradition; it is unhistoric. In England it might have had the impressiveness of prescription —might have been the material of such a melancholy as Thomas Hardy's; even in New England much might have been done in Puritan dark gray; but in Dakota it seems to have been, to the artist whose inheritance it is, chiefly the material of exasperation. He explains its existence not by any splendid and gloomy conception of a Blind Power in whose grip humanity is helpless, but rather prosaically as the result of social injustice, of institutions not founded in accordance with the principle of the single tax.

One may well wonder if this result is not unfortunate. Has it not partially impaired the artist's perception of the dignity and antiquity of his material? Human tribulation is an old and impressive story. Has his emotionalization of the frontier not been crowded down to a lower level than it might otherwise have attained? Has not the determined *actualism* which Mr. Garland here so sternly reasserts, really been the refuge in adversity of a strongly romantic talent, a talent thwarted by the barrenness of its material?

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