

CHRISTOPHER WARD

A LITERARY APPRECIATION

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As the years draw on lending perspective, it becomes apparent that not the least significant feature of the life of the country during the 1920's was the literature that was being created, somewhat feverishly perhaps but nonetheless genuinely, by a multitude of hands. Most of the hands were young and many of their owners believed themselves "lost" not only because of the dislocations of the recent war but because of the essential bareness of their cultural inheritance as Americans. Many of them, perhaps most, were out of the Middle West. For the most part, their mood was stormily protestant, their method naturalistic. Quite unashamedly they followed the lead of "that man" Dreiser who, as early as the turn of the century, had flouted the tradition of genteelism. The banner under which they marched was no longer literature's traditional milk-white flag with its inspirational motto "Excelsior" but a darkling banner on whose folds the word "Revolution" or "Sex" or "Ugliness" could be described. Different orthodox critics beholding saw different words, but all agreed that the new word, whatever it was, was an offense. Later the South was to join the parade, but for the moment it was high noon in the Middle West. There was the upsurge; it seemed that the prairies were sprouting literary talent as lushly as corn and that out of the villages was coming a generation of young men and women propelled for better or worse to literary activity (and Greenwich Village) by an urge relatively no less compelling than that by which the Norwegian lemming of a season casts itself into the sea. Even at this late date this thrusting forth of talent is impressive; to us, in the midst of our present literary desert, its monuments are as a mark upon the horizon's rim bidding remembrance of a greener time. But at the moment it was nothing so fixed; rather it was

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an atmosphere, turbulent, antinomian, but also exciting with electrical ozone and portentous of things to come—perhaps “the great American novel.” It was as if the American earth were beginning to speak through the discontents of youth. In the East too, of course (for there will always be an East), there were writers and writing but of a more studied mode, and insufficient to swing the balance against the multiplied energies pouring from the West. Such, in brief, was our national literary picture in the early and mid-1920’s. With changing accents and a widening scene, with new talents and scarcely unimpaired energy it was to survive the Great Depression and to disappear at last, ironically, only in the light of recovery and of war, amid conditions strikingly similar to those prevalent at its inception.

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It was into this scene that Christopher Ward, the subject of our memorial this evening, came to play his role both as critic and creative literary artist. For twelve years, from 1923 to 1935, he bore his part, producing, aside from his historical studies, ten books of imaginative literature comprehending as wide a range in matter and style as any coming from the pen of one man. On several counts this achievement is remarkable. As a man already in middle life, Christopher Ward assumed an honorable place in a movement that, as I have already hinted, was primarily youth’s. Though an Easterner, a conservative and a sophisticate, he comprehended in his view the rising talents of the entire nation, knew them and evaluated them. His youthfulness is a tribute to his elasticity of spirit, an endowment in elders as rare as supple arteries; his comprehension, the mark of a searching, catholic literary curiosity. This latter endowment, I would remark, is not so unusual as a possession as it is as the employment of a man busy among the labors of law and business who found time for Belles Lettres; found time for them not only as a recreation in the “fine art of living” but as the material for the wise exercise of a talent. Amateurs of letters are not few but their temptation is often to surrender to the indolent, even narcotizing pleasure of their interest. Ward was that unusual amateur whose interest was not only fresh to receive but lively to give forth and to transmit his impressions, not in talk only but by the written word; and so to become, first, a true carrier of ideas and, later, an original force.

Writing always in the spirit of the age he comprehended, he went on with increasing seriousness, although never abandoning hilarity, until he could be satisfied with no less exalted companionship than that of the Muse of History.

In 1923 Ward published his *Triumph of the Nut and Other Parodies*, "timidly" dedicating the volume to the seventeen authors whose current work he gleefully criticized by imitation. Many of the books imitated were ephemeral, but enough books of quality were included to give the volume still some point. In these parodies Ward's traits of strong common sense and uncommon nonsense found a very proper vehicle. I think it will be admitted that either of these qualities in any time or place is rare, and rarer their combination. The combination when found is quite irresistible. The strong common sense might be expected of a lawyer (although it might not be forthcoming) but drollery is not regarded as "of the essence." Where it comes it is a pure gift from heaven. Yet these two good things are the foundations of Ward's work: insight and fun, a twisted strand, the latter making lively the sense, the former keeping sane the humor.

The Triumph of the Nut was followed by two other volumes of like sort, *Twisted Tales*, 1924, and *Foolish Fiction*, 1925. To choose among these three volumes would be difficult, for the same perception and the same delicious sense of the comic marks them all. Many of the pieces found their first reading public in the pages of the *Saturday Review of Literature* and the *New York Evening Post*. So far as their subject matter has escaped oblivion, they are still valid critical documents although their fun, necessarily, with the passage of time, has grown fainter. Parody is a kind of criticism and criticism by its nature is "of the day." Therefore, before passing from these books, I wish to pay tribute to their excellence in their kind. From several points of view the work of the parodist is essentially dangerous. To begin with, the effect of parody is depreciatory if not degrading; therefore, although the parodist may influence people, he will scarcely make friends. In fact, he emerges as that unpleasant creature the satirist, one always to be feared if not hated; and appears worse for exercising his scourge of laughter by turning the work under inspection against itself through the exaggerations of travesty. Further, the road of parody is one on which it is easier to start than to arrive. Extravagance recommends itself all too easily. Its spirit may be-

come harsh or senseless. And at the end, a burlesque may seem like "breaking a butterfly on the wheel," both a cruel sport and wasteful. These are some of the dangers besetting the parodist. They are reported here only because Ward magnificently surmounts them.

He succeeds because beneath all the extravaganza of his fun-making, there is always some genuine critical point that he keeps in mind and never lets slip out of sight. His laughter is directed differently at different times, sometimes at a stylistic quirk, sometimes more fundamentally at a failure of matter or a defect of point of view; but always the reader knows what the point is. Further it is a real point, perhaps one to be conceded reluctantly in the case of some favorite author, but a real point. Moreover, to bring out the point involved, Ward uses his material with scrupulosity; that is, with close reference to the text. Of course, there is the trick that illuminates the latent absurdity, but it is fairly done upon identifiable material. Further, Ward had the gift of words to keep his comedy light and fluid. His exquisite connotative sense of words enables him again and again to make punning ladders of great audacity—fine verbal play. And through all his parodies transpires the spirit of the laughter of the mind, contagious and delightful.

Among Ward's parodies of contemporary books there is one which deserves mention by itself because it transcends the others in merit and in fact signalizes a transition to another kind of parody that marks his later work. This is the genuine small masterpiece, *Gentleman into Goose*, 1924, the re-doing of David Garnett's prize-winning novelette of the year before, *Lady into Fox*. *Gentleman into Goose* is remarkable as a parody that can be read with enjoyment for and by itself, without reference to its British original, although as a parody of Garnett's delicate fantasia it is wonderfully good. Point by point the two tales match, if one cares to make the comparison. There derives an element of intellectual enjoyment in doing so. Indeed, this element of parody deserves mention as one of its virtues. As a form, it is intellectual. Apart from its critical-satirical cast, the finesse of tracing one pattern like another pattern, yet with calculated differences, and the appreciation of this feat by the reader, are the intentions of the game. In brief, parody at its best is written by clever people for other people clever enough to enjoy it. And, by the same token,

the dangers of super-sophistication, the esotericism of the coterie attend it. These dangers, too, Ward escapes—not because he was not an intellectual aristocrat, for he was that very surely, but because his talent launched him far beyond the shallows that snag the merely clever trifler. His story of how Mr. Timothy Teapot was changed by the wish of his unloving wife into a gander (it had been a marriage of convenience and of deceit on both sides) and how she trained him barnyardward until, losing all trace of his erstwhile humanity, he began to consort with a goose, whereupon she killed him and served him up for a dinner for her neighborhood gossips, is a delightful whimsy. It is not only Garnett in reverse (Garnett's gentleman grieved inconsolably when his fox-transformed wife finally disappeared in the snow in spite of all his efforts to hold her); it is also a drolly cynical commentary on human life, couched in that slightly archaic English which Ward found so droll and in which he was most expert. *Gentlemen into Goose* should stand for many a year as a delectable minor work of art.

In 1926 Ward began his career as a novelist with his naturalistic novel of life in the city of Wilmington, *One Little Man*; and in the following year in his second novel *Starling* he continued to inspect the local scene in the purlieus of wealth and society north and west of the city, along the Brandywine, and at the same time to express through the marital problem of his heroine some ideas on the nature of the marriage pact sensibly considered. Like a good naturalist, and in the spirit of his time, Ward was looking about him high and low, at the extremes of the society which was his milieu, recording what he saw and letting the chips fall where they would. *One Little Man*, the more naturalistic of the two books, is a drab book and a repulsive one except insofar as it is lightened by touches of ironic humor and penetrated by a deep sympathy for the fate of "Herbie" Frick, the one "little man," its protagonist. "Herbie" may be compared with the wistful little Cockneys of H. G. Wells' early fiction, "little men" crushed by a world too much for them but left at last to live on not too unhappily in an obscurity which is their only safety. At the end of *One Little Man* one hopes as much for "Herbie" but one fears too. Remember that Herbert Frick is a representative citizen of Wilmington, born into it, shaped by it. As protagonist he strives against the mass entity of the city; and unfurnished with friends,

education, or practical intelligence, he is worsted. In all his concerns of business or of love, he is inept, yet harmless and well-meaning. But he is no imbecile. He is intended to illustrate the average, the norm of our culture among all the "little men" and women of the row houses, narrow streets, corner shops and precarious employments in the difficulties that are their every-day lot. The picture is not a pretty one or a heartening one. Naturalistic novels usually are not.

In contrast, *Starling* deals with a different terrain and a different social stratum. It pictures, beyond the city, the charming countryside of country-house and hunt-club, the seats of hereditary wealth and pride, of a cosmopolitan, even international society wielding great powers without ostentation, yet softened subtly to effeteness by too much leisure and impaired by its unperceived isolation. Here again we see the naturalistic formula at work, for the inhabitants of "Bruceland" are just as much conditioned by their environment as the "little people" of the town, and just as unhealthily. But beyond this, the chief burden of the book is the marriage argument, which is carried forward by a somewhat too ingenious story heavily weighted in favor of the heroine. *Starling* becomes a very explicit "problem novel" and to that extent it is less successful than *One Little Man*. But by the same token it is also a true experimental book in the spirit of the time.

In the rhythm of action and reaction, Ward, after his experiments in naturalistic and problem fiction, turned back to his old exercise as a parodist, but as one of a higher order, no longer bound to the contemplation of the contemporary, but tripping and rhyming in gayest verse after the most exalted originals. There are two volumes of these *divertissements*, *The Saga of Cap'n John Smith*, 1928, and *Sir Galahad and Other Rhymes*, 1935. For my liking they are the best things Ward ever did and I should not like to have to declare a preference between them.

The Saga, I believe, can be taken for the true harbinger of that interest in history that was to grow in Ward until it finally carried him completely out of the realm of literature into that of history (of which sojourn you will be hearing more presently). At bottom *The Saga* retells Captain Smith's own story as he told it in his *General History*, which you may see, if you care, in two tall red volumes reposing on a shelf in the Ward Room. The chief

episodes of Smith's life among the Turks, among the Indians of Virginia and upon the misty coast of New England are retold, but with the difference that an adventurous life becomes the gayest of comedies. There are sly references to our own times—as when Captain Smith is perplexed by the Irish puritan mores of contemporary Boston. But the fun is not alone in the matter. Verbally the lyrics are full of echoes, a melange as full of allusion as a poem by T. S. Eliot, but in the popular style. Carroll, Longfellow, Macaulay, Noyes, Gilbert, and others, and old songs too, make a various lilting music. The provenance of the material of *Sir Galahad* is equally varied and from the most exalted sources. Not only the body of Arthurian legend which the title denotes, but also Homer, Virgil, the great novels of the Victorian era and our American story have been levied on. The book is a *jeu d'esprit*, witty, effervescent, a joyous excursion among the classics. It is a work of virtuosity interpreting for us, best of all his works, Ward as one who knew that enjoyment is the end of literature and that the best is impervious to harm from jest.

In his two novels, *The Adventures of Jonathan Drew, a Rolling Stone*, 1932, and its sequel, *A Yankee Rover*, 1933, Christopher Ward wrote his last fiction. These are historical novels, romantic historical novels, and as such constitute a kind of interlude among the historical writings on which he was now entered. Conceived in the sensational tradition of Charles Reade, the novels purport to detail the career of one Jonathan Drew as he roamed this country between the years 1821 and 1829. They are solidly based in fact, upon data which Ward gathered in the American history collection which is being dedicated this evening; and they present a truthful picture of the land from Massachusetts to Missouri, from Ohio to Sante Fe, and from New York to South Carolina, and places between, both primitive and cultivated. Drew is a supposititious person, yet the adventures that befell him actually befell men, this man and that, as they travelled the roads, the trails and the rivers, among honest folk and scoundrels in the America of a century and more ago. There is gusty, elemental humor; also, there is excitement, the spine-tingling adventure provided by conscienceless killers and encounters with natural calamities. On the whole, the picture is not pretty. But who asks prettiness where the sense of the past is so graphically contrived that one forgets to boggle at the apparently indestructible hero

and asks no better boon than to wander on with him forever? A bright day arches above these books; they are triumphs of romantic picaresque fiction. In that kind they are as good as can be.

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The tale is told. I have tried to trace the course of Christopher Ward's activity in imaginative literature through what seem its major steps of progress. A true literary connoisseur, he turned first to criticism, not a pedantic criticism but one running on the air-light feet of puckish imitation. Fundamentally his bent was critical. Let it be admitted that the lyric gift was denied him; also, the dramatic. Still nature had dowered him with good gifts, a precise intellect and its twin, not always vouchsafed, comic perception. The latter led him on into the delights of his witty, urbane verse-making, and was to be absent wholly from little he did. His energetic intelligence was to lead him through a series of fictional experiments, in forms naturalistic, propagandistic and romantic, with varying success, never unsuccessful. For description and argument and theater, which is contrivance, his talent was apt, and he tried nothing beyond his scope. But how varied was his experiment, leading him even to a one-act play, an item of the Collection here! Mostly his experiments were on "the tune of his time," a way of "keeping in touch." In the end their tendency was to deliver him to the altogether sober service of history. That was the fitting destination prescribed by his orderly intellect, Ward's prime mover from the beginning. However, in the meantime, he had taken an honorable place in the literature of the 1920's and 1930's through a series of books critical and experimental. Upon the title page of one of his last novels he described himself as "Christopher Ward of Wilmington, Delaware." Amid the rout of names of that prolific time, that name was one of luster. It still is to the informed; and as the task of literary accountancy begins for an era now sufficiently distant to be respectable for inquiry, we may be sure that it will be safe for the future; safe, I would add my hope, not only in the protective arms of scholarship, but safe, too, for enjoyment as we turn back to the well-springs of that past. Accordingly, we may be thankful for that royal superscription "Delaware" that bids us weave the name of Christopher Ward into the honor of our state and into the continuing intellectual life of the state through this university.