Homage to an Ancestor (1783-1880)

By HORACE GREGORY

Remember Dublin under the stone cross
down Sackville Street: mount stairs at Trinity:
wake from its blackbird towers toward the quay
to count the stars that run with Liffey's tide
and rise tomorrow in the Irish Sea.

How is the firmament tonight my lord?
where Robert Emmet (seagreen Lycidas
of my heart) once bowed and walked with me.

The crops failed under a cold moon when he died.

Close Dublin castle doors—goodby my city!
The gates are shut; give the dead man my key—

(Here where Wisconsin maples climb the sky
return to Calvary, see grass-hedged flowers
open their stars at noon, witness the grave:
assemble seasons, count the days, the hours
that lie within his bones:
how deep, how many years?
Compute his birth by Greek astronomy:
cover the face, the hands were ivory,
the lips were fire and in this darkness
where the limbs expire
only the echoes of the voice remain.)

I should have been a king of liberty,
sat with the queen in Cassiopeia's chair
in this new land this inland island where
ave Marias, blessed by the pope, immaculate,
flower toward God upon a Sunday morning

I saw my empire vanish and bright Monticellos fade

Was I White Father of Menomenee?
The words are spoken with a broken memory for names,
my brain a mausoleum of dead wives
Even the girls are gone, their delicate
bodies in the eastwind, their small breasts sighing
prayers for an old man's soul that sailed at midnight,
steered three thousand leagues
off Capricorn where rats command the ship and pilgrims die
like Mormons in a covered-wagon desert
O Robert Emmet: *when my nation*
takes its place among the ruins of the earth, then only then
will I return again.
These are my acres:
stockyard tenements, old iron rooted in river clay—
give them away;
they are my epitaph. My sons inherit
ten square miles of wind and rain.
Is the hearse ready? Feed the horses; it is a long ride east-
[ward.

Books

Journey's End

Remembrance of Things Past. Part Seven: *The Past Recaptured.* By Marcel Proust. Translated by Frederick A. Blossom. Albert and Charles Boni. $2.50.

THE last volume of Proust's great novel furnishes the key to the whole. Carrying the story of the narrator's life up to the moment when he is ready to begin the book for which his entire existence has been a preparation, it rounds off each of the innumerable subsidiary stories, and for the first time it makes perfectly explicit both the metaphysical idea upon which the author's method is based and the relation of all his many themes one to another. We know from a published letter that Proust originally thought of his novel as considerably shorter than it turned out to be, but all of its essential features must have been in his mind when he began, and nothing about the whole amazing achievement is more remarkable than the way in which literally hundreds of apparently independent characters, situations, and *aperçus* are finally discovered to be all parts of an almost unbelievably intricate but unified pattern.

The casual reader will, to be sure, make no such discovery, and he may be readily forgiven if the huge work seems to him only a brilliant miscellany. Indeed, the most careful first reading will fail to give adequately even a general idea of the plan of the whole, and will fail to do so for the simple reason that no human memory is good enough to retain from one such reading all that it is necessary to have in mind before the main outlines of the structure begin to be appreciated. But anyone who will turn back to the first fifty pages of the first volume, and will note how one seemingly random paragraph after another introduces the various themes which are later to be developed and related in counterpoint fashion, will begin to understand how the whole is put together, and will find himself upon the road to one discovery after another, until he is brought at last to the realization that literature has few if any parallels to a structure so vast yet so unified as this. "Remembrance of Things Past" is, indeed, like some enormous building whose grand outlines can be perceived only when one stands a little away from it, but whose details, also, are planned with such exquisite precision that one must examine them bit by bit. It is like a great cathedral in which one may wander day by day, making new discoveries at each visit, and marveling that one could have overlooked yesterday some grace of decoration or some neat rightness of structure which is so overwhelmingly beautiful today.

Elsewhere I have attempted to analyze at some length the work as a whole—to discuss Proust's theory of art, to outline the main features of his pattern, and to interpret his novel as the story of his disillusion with the actual world as typified by his disillusion with that world of fashionable society where he had hoped to find the brilliance, the wit, the taste, and the generosity which, so he had thought, should exist there if they existed anywhere. In this review it is impossible to undertake anything so ambitious, but I may call attention to the two features of this last volume which make it more essential than any of the other single volumes to an understanding of Proust. In the first place, none of the other individual episodes is more brilliant in itself or more revealing in respect to the emotional tone of the whole than that which is concerned with the final, grotesquely horrible degeneration of the great M. de Charlus, or that which describes the accomplished cruelty of the death-blow which the actress Rachel gives to the pride of her aging rival,

Berma. In the second place, much of the second section of the last volume is given over to a description of the process by which the narrator achieves that recovery of past time which he has retired from the world to achieve, and which has been assumed through all the preceding instalments.

Early in the first volume the narrator had had his now famous adventure with the madeleine dipped in a cup of tea. When he touched it to his lips the identity of the sensation with that experienced in childhood caused a vision to break upon him, and like a group of those magic flowers which the Japanese cause to expand in a bowl of water:

> . . . all the flowers of our garden and of Swann's park, the water lilies of the Vivonne, and the good people of the village with their little houses and the church and all its environs—came forth, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.

The vividness of that vision set him off upon his long quest for the means, not merely of remembering past time, but of recovering it with that completeness which made the just-recaptured hours of his childhood actually present and relivable. That he ultimately succeeded in his quest, the almost endless narrative which follows is evidence, but it is not until it is about to reach its end that the present is caught up with and the moment comes to describe that rapid series of incidents, each parallel to the incident of the madeleine, which gave him success just when he had despaired not only of life but of literature. Did something of the kind actually happen to Proust, or is the whole elaborate account of the process by which the great enlightenment took place merely his way of suggesting the difference between the pale, fragmentary character of mere memory and one of those works of art of which we can say, not only that its characters are real, but also that the life which it holds is changeless—"forever wilt thou love and she be fair"?

Perhaps the question does not need to be answered. The fact remains that the whole strange account of the narrator's quasi-mystical experience serves perfectly to crown the book and to maintain that curious, fascinating dubiety everywhere evident whenever one stops to ask to what extent the narrator and Marcel Proust himself are identical. To one who has lived in the work for all the hours required to read it, the story of how the past was finally recaptured is approached with all the thrill appropriate to a long-awaited revelation, and it is introduced with a characteristically Proustian sentence uttered by the narrator just after he has finished describing the hopelessness of his despair:

> But sometimes it is just at the moment when all appears lost that a signal comes which may save us; after knocking at all the doors that lead nowhere, the only one through which we can enter, one which we might have sought in vain for a hundred years, we stumble against unwittingly, and it opens.

The critics are already almost acrimoniously divided over the question of the rank which ought to be assigned to "Remembrance of Things Past." If I understand them aright, those who would deny it a place at or near the top of the list of all the books written in the twentieth century base their objections chiefly upon the fact that it is not, according to them, at all like what the great modern novel ought to be. Specifically, it is contemplative and concerned with the experiences of an individual soul; it is Apollonian rather than Dionysian; and it does not deal with any contemporary problems in economics or sociology. But though all this is true, those of us who believe it to be a really major work are inclined to ask whether it would not be better to leave aside the dubious question of what a great novel ought to do and to be willing to consider simply what this one does. Nor does it seem to me possible that, if that is done, any critic can fail to grant the triumphant success of this Gargantuan tale. Once it has been read, it is literally unforgettable. The experiences which it affords become never-to-be-lost parts of one's own experience. Half a dozen of the individual characters, as well as the conception as a whole, are solid, unescapable, and like some event of history they are always there whether one approves or disapproves, admires or despises. No student of literature, whatever his opinions or his tastes, can forget its existence, and it could no more be done away with in response to an aesthetic whim than a pyramid or a cathedral could be done away with by some advocate of an exclusively "modern" world. Of how many other books written during the last thirty years can that be said?

Incidentally, it is a curious fact that "Remembrance of Things Past" was too long for both its author and its translator. The former died before he had revised his last volume, and the latter before he had translated it. "The Past Recaptured" is done into English by Dr. Frederick Blossom, and while I have not made any detailed comparisons with the original text, he seems to have accomplished admirably his very difficult task.

JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH

The Art of Dulness

Summer Is Ended. By John Herrmann. Covici-Friede. $2.

"CHARLOTTE DALE had felt from her high-school days that what she wanted most in life was a home and children, quite a few children, and for their father she wanted Carl Yoeman." This is the first sentence of "Summer Is Ended," and the rest of the book tells how Charlotte married Carl, and why she was unlikely to have any children. Starting on a small-town newspaper, Charlotte subsequently got a job in Detroit, and finally had a good position with a New York advertising agency. But all the time she wanted Carl. At one point she was engaged to him, but he threw her over for another girl. After she learned that he had not married the other girl, she followed him to Paris, found him, lived with him, and presumably married him. She learned, however, that because of an abortion that had followed an attempt to forget his jilting her, she was sterile.

Why John Herrmann wrote this book it is difficult to imagine. Its irony is, of course, clear, and it is conceivable that something rather moving might have been made of Charlotte's story. But Herrmann has resolutely devoted himself to making his account just as dull and trivial as possible. With the most austere consistency he has recorded every banality of his characters' speech, and he has molded his own style on the model of their conversation. His vocabulary, for the purposes of this book, is that of a moron; his sentence structure has the inflexibility of the letters of a twelve-year-old; his prose moves with the gracelessness of a freshman theme.

It must have taken a good deal of effort to achieve such perfect flatness, to keep the characters from being even slightly interesting, to hold the style unblemished by vigor or freshness. But what end is the effort supposed to serve? The long short story Herrmann contributed to *Scribner's* had the same sort of conscientious colorlessness, but the reader came to have enough feeling for the jewelry salesman to be moved by his tragedy, and there was even a suggestion, though rather clumsily introduced, of the breakdown of the salesman's world. Here there is nothing, nothing but the bald account of a thoroughly dull young woman who wants children and does not get them.

John Herrmann ought to snap out of it. That he is a talented young man one can hardly deny; only an artist could have kept himself down to such a level for 286 pages. But what does he think he is doing? To an outsider it looks as if there were hundreds of fine themes lying around begging for some author to use them, especially some author with an interest in