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## Dissenters and Dreamers

Edward G. Lueders

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My personal reaction to Fergusson's thesis is that we are doing ourselves a great disservice by analyzing contemporary drama through a reconstruction of an idea of a theater based upon a scholarly inquiry into the past. Few of the better playwrights today will admit their works to consist of trivialities better expressed on a medicine man's stage or from the lips of a troubadour. To attempt a judgment against modern drama because modern drama lacks a Sophoclean synthesis is to condemn modern man because he prefers an anesthesia rather than exaltation through suffering in the dentist's chair. The theater today may be wandering without a bearing insofar as one theater tradition may be concerned, but this does not mean that the human race has abandoned philosophical realism, nor its claim to its collective identity as "real people in a real world."

*Edward G. Lueders*

## DISSENTERS AND DREAMERS

THE LATE English critic Holbrook Jackson was never one to startle his reader with pyrotechnics—either critical or rhetorical. His discourse was comfortable, competent, and consistent. Insight in his friendly essays seldom flashes from the page, but reveals itself through the cumulative effect of a steady, continuous glow. In twentieth-century letters, he represents the genuine pandit rather than the fashionable pundit. He draws on an impressive familiarity with his material, but he neither lectures nor, in the conventional sense, teaches—he considers and shares.

*Dreamers of Dreams*<sup>1</sup> focuses his amiable erudition on six nineteenth-century writers, Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, Emerson,

<sup>1</sup> Farrar, Straus and Company, Inc., 1950.

Thoreau, and Whitman, all of whom "are, or would be, practical idealists, seeking by reform or revolution or personal example to realize their dreams." While giving ample attention to the cross-currents of influence and ideas that connect the lives and dreams of the six, Jackson imposes no false unity on their work. His method admirably utilizes exposition without yielding to the excesses of argumentation. Each man emerges separate and distinct, largely through a generous use of direct quotation woven neatly and functionally into the fabric of each essay. Yet the conformity of their anti-materialistic dreams and their search for a practical antidote to the social ills of their century is forcefully, if not directly, brought before the reader. There is general agreement among the six in their diagnosis of the ills; it is in their prescription and treatment that they differ.

Such a presentation and evaluation of our heritage of nineteenth-century social dreams plays the double role of literary and social criticism. While the latter is often accomplished tacitly, it is seldom far from the attention of either author or reader. An exception is the essay on Ruskin, which is devoted disproportionately to pages and pages of data and speculation about his personal aberrations while his Guild of St. George is dispatched in two paragraphs.

Stylistically, the book suffers occasionally from a rather coy attempt to lend immediacy to its text by using the present tense while discussing the six authors. The confusion which results is sometimes disturbing, as when Jackson writes of Carlyle's marriage, "In spite of the legend that they were unsuited for married life, the letters prove that they are not always unhappy." But one can almost forgive Holbrook Jackson this gauche device for achieving intimacy with the times and figures of the last century; if anyone can assume such familiarity, it is he.

Reginald Cook's *Passage to Walden*<sup>2</sup> sets out to "penetrate the essential quality and evoke the richness of [Thoreau's] correspon-

<sup>2</sup> Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949.

dence with nature." This statement is partially misleading, however, for the reader encounters a ratio of five parts of evocation to one part of penetration. Still, through a sometimes confusing indirection, an enthusiastic rhetoric, a Whitmanesque penchant for cataloguing, and a skillful use of Thoreau's *Journal*, Cook achieves his goal.

Professor Cook properly emphasizes Thoreau's primary feeling for nature, a subjective sympathy which can be distinguished from the attitude of a trained, scientific naturalist toward the objects of his study. The book does full justice to this fundamental force in Thoreau's life and work, an element that shorter, more general essays, such as Holbrook Jackson's, can offer only part of their attention.

Oddly, however, the most successful sections of *Passage to Walden* are those most remote from the avowed purpose of the book. The final chapter, "Sinews of Style," is an absorbing examination of the aims, techniques, and effects of Thoreau's indelible prose. An earlier chapter, "The Machine Age and Man," leaves the "correspondence with nature" theme to comment succinctly and provocatively on some sociological, ethical implications of Thoreau's works. But the substantiality of Professor Cook's main study is not blighted by the treatment of these other aspects of his subject. Instead they prevent the study from viewing Thoreau's exceptional rapport with nature as a thing-in-itself, an end product in the reader's reception and understanding of the author. Thoreau's work drew its strength from his correspondence with nature, but the vitality it has for most readers is today more than ever its correspondence with us and with our society.