The Spirit of American Literature, by John Albert Macy. Doubleday, Page & Co., New York. $1.50.

The most interesting things in American literature are its myths. By the treatment of these myths shall ye judge a critic of our literature.

The Hawthorne myth is one of the most interesting. Hawthorne is hailed as "the poetic embodiment of the Puritan spirit." "In sooth," says John Macy (and his incisive treatment of this myth serves as an example of his method), "Hawthorne was the least Puritan of New England writers. . . . Puritanism never produces art; it kills art. As well speak of a deaf violinist as of a Puritan poet. When Milton is writing poetry he is a pagan; as a Puritan he either does not write or writes badly." Hawthorne "was interested in fanciful manifestations of the soul, not in genuine ethical problems; his home was fairyland. . . . The theme of the Scarlet Letter appealed less to his moral sense than to his pictorial imagination. . . . The Scarlet Letter is a development of the theme: 'On a Field Sable, the Letter A, Gules.'" Hawthorne "stands alone in the literature of New England, a verbal melodist without any ethical intention what-

soever, a delicate detached artist, as solitary in Concord as Poe was in New York; symbolizing, if he symbolizes anything, not the Puritan spirit, but the spirit of beauty everlastingly hostile or indifferent to the crabbed austerities and the soul-killing morbidity of Puritan ethics."

Macy is not an intentional iconoclast. Yet such is the critical rubbish cluttered around American literature that even his none-too-deep analysis makes a veritable *debacle* of accepted opinions and literary values. "American literature is on the whole idealistic, sweet, delicate, nicely finished. There is little of it which might not have appeared in the *Youth's Companian.*" "The poets are thin, moonshiny, meticulous in technique. Novelists are few and feeble, and dramatists are non-existent." And Macy not only specifically proves his point in connection with individual authors, but indicates the "why" therefor: American literature did not grapple with the life and doings of its own moment and *milieu:* American life is practically non-existent in American literature.

The vital defect in Macy's book is an over-emphasis on literary lineage. "Literature is a succession of books from books," he says, which is only partly true. Technical developments are derivatives from books, in a large measure; but the living urge in literature springs directly from life—not ultimately, as Macy contends, but immediately. There are traces of Fichte's philosophy in Emerson; but Emerson's philosophy was an expression of American life, independent of Fichte, and harmonizing with Fichte only insofar as Fichte's philosophy may have corresponded to American psychology. The importance of the social factor is not sufficiently emphasized. Macy is a pragmatist; he "humanizes" American literature, but does not socialize it.

Macy's study has an immediate value as the first approach to an adequate study of American literature; it also has a potential value in that, being a pioneer in its field, its imperfections as much as its merits blazon the way for an adequate interpretation of American literature.

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