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The Double Men of Criticism

BY MARY M. COLUM

SOME of our guides to the higher intellectual and literary life seem to be going off at the deep end in a fashion that to the concerned beholder brings a new shudder and a new ennui. Opening the latest book of Archibald MacLeish, a work of selected prose entitled *A Time to Speak*,¹ we struggle with the second paragraph of the first page (we use the royal "we" for the same reason that Marshal Pétain uses it — the first person singular seems too egoistic). Archibald MacLeish is writing a challenge to those who say that poetry is dead.

Let them bury it, then. Let them bury the big bones of Yeats and the Hamlet-grinning skull of Eliot and the man-smelling shirt of Carl Sandburg and the splintered china and bright glass of Wallace Stevens and the quiet-cricket-talking of Frost in the dead leaves and the mole-rummaging under the lot of Ezra Pound.

Now we don't know a thing that could be done with bones, skulls,

smelly shirts, splintered china except to bury them, unless we burn them; we couldn't very well let them stay around. Archibald MacLeish's *saeva indignatio*, which in his *Frescoes for Rockefeller Center* is so shapely in his beautiful accomplished verse, becomes in his uncontrolled prose so dissolute that it no longer makes any communication.

The loud-mouthed, disrespectful, horse-laughing challenge to those who tell us poetry is "pure." Those who tell us poetry is "poetry." Those who tell us poetry is a parlor game and has no truck with the living of live men or the misery of hungry men or the politics of ambitious men or the indignation of believing men.

Well, Archibald MacLeish seems to know some queer people, and they get queerer as we go on. He tells us of people who conceive of a poem as "an embellished bit of prose," and there are people who wonder whether poetry is an art or more than an art or less than an art, "being no more than a sort of

¹ *A Time To Speak*, by Archibald MacLeish. \$2.75. Houghton Mifflin.

conventionalized prose." All this makes us concerned for the kind of company Mr. MacLeish must be keeping down there in Washington; trying to answer their Gracie Allen questions as he does in this book is all like going over the matter as to whether an apple will fall down or go up if you shake the tree: all the answers have been set down a long time ago and there is no sense in wasting Archibald MacLeish's time on them. "Poetry is not decorated prose," he tells us (Who ever thought it was?) "but is stripped and vivid speech." But criticism published in a book should also be stripped and vivid speech or it is pointless.

About his own art, however, he has striking things to say, as when he tells us that poetry cannot continue in its present state, "an art which lives by the production of little books to lie on little tables." Of course poetry has to be spoken or recited or chanted to be real: the vehicle for it is the human voice. It was only after he had heard his own words in his verse-plays spoken from the stage of the Abbey Theatre that Yeats developed the style of his latest and greatest poetry. "To flourish," Archibald MacLeish says, "an art must touch the general mind of its time." True, it must touch the general mind even

though it is caviar to the general.

In *The Irresponsibles*, included in this collection, MacLeish ponders on what posterity will ask of the intellectuals, the scholars and writers of this generation, why they did not fight the enemies of the intellect with the weapons of the intellect, why, in short, have they been so helpless and ineffective. It is hard to answer this. But maybe it is that mental complacency and mental cowardice were never so rampant at any period and that a mind-dissolving empiricism, an opportunism, has undermined not only the intellectuals but peoples and governments, has made them hollow. MacLeish has a chapter on the Spanish War written in 1937 about "those who fight our battles," which, while it is certainly not his intention, shows more than any satire could, the ineptitude of our intellectuals: like Pirandello's Characters in search of an Author, they appear as Characters in search of a Cause. Can we ever forget those dreary auctions of dreary manuscripts by means of which the intellectuals fought for democracy in Spain?

Leaving Archibald MacLeish, we turn to Van Wyck Brooks, who also was mixed up in numerous things like the Spanish War, auctions, meetings of Writers' Leagues

and that whole parade that distracted peoples' minds from what was really happening in Europe. Mr. Brooks has his say about literature in a little pamphlet, *On Literature Today*.² He differs from MacLeish in two essentials: first, he knows how to write prose — restrained, polished prose, a medium well mastered. But in comparison with MacLeish he knows very little about literature as an art, and no gloss that he can give his prose can conceal that fact.

Van Wyck Brooks' admirers are doing him a grave disservice in cajoling him to express his opinions on literature or go into purely literary criticism. He has never been a literary critic: in his biographies, fine as they are on other sides, he has always had a difficulty with the literary work of his subjects. His own line, a line in which he has no equal, is what some people term social criticism; it might, perhaps, be described as the writing of the history of a person or of a people from the literature they have produced, an interpretation rendered always in social or moral terms. But when he gets on to the art of literature, to poetry, to prose produced by individual writers, he stumbles around like a blind

man in a desert in search of a peg on which to hang his hat. In writing of contemporary literature he fishes up a few things out of his subliminal consciousness that have little to do with the literature he is examining. He demands, "What did Joyce's *Ulysses* say except that life was a bad joke?" Well, that was the last thing that Joyce would make of life in or out of literature. As John Peale Bishop has said of him, Joyce is a great comic poet of the breed of Aristophanes; *Ulysses* is the greatest piece of humorous literature of our time, full of laughter and comedy as well as tragedy and compassion. Life for Joyce was a lonely adventure, as it is likely to be for artists, but it never ceased to be a great adventure even in the face of immense personal tragedy.

Mr. Brooks' lack of comprehension of the contemporary world and contemporary writing leads him into other blind alleys. He says that today critics ask of a writer, not whether he contributes to life, but whether he excels in some new trick. "It is their formal originality that has given prestige to writers like Joyce, Eliot and Gertrude Stein." About the first two, anyway, he is wrong: Joyce and Eliot had to convey a new experience to the world, to reveal a fresh strata of human nature — Joyce more

² *On Literature Today*, by Van Wyck Brooks. \$1.00. Dutton.

than Eliot — and so had to discover the form which best represented the conquest of their material. If Mr. Brooks cares to call this “formal originality” it is all right, but to call it a trick is all wrong.

Again, when he accuses Eliot of exalting the minor poets over the major ones and of preferring to Milton a dozen obscure metaphysical poets, he is beside the mark. Eliot, like many moderns, writers and non-writers, has made it clear that he prefers Dante to Milton or even to Shakespeare because Dante has more to say to our time, and also because he prefers the civilization Dante came out of to the one Milton came out of. After all, it is a familiar phenomenon in literary history for a great writer to have more to say to one age than to another: Shakespeare and Dante had but little to say to the eighteenth century. As to the interest in the metaphysical poets shown by many moderns, Eliot and other writers have made it clear that being faced with the problem of assimilating and expressing in their art many disparate kinds of experience, they looked back on the poets of the past who had solved a like problem. As Eliot has said, “The metaphysicals [and one may add, Dante] possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour

any kind of experience.” Consequently they had something to teach him.

Does Mr. Brooks praise any modern writer? Yes, Robert Frost and Lewis Mumford: they have the attitude to life that he commends. If we seek to find out whose writings other than Mr. Mumford’s and Mr. Frost’s he commends, we discover at least one from a publisher’s advertisement: it is *Do These Bones Live*, by Edward Dahlberg.³

This writer, he tells us, has produced “a profoundly moving personal vision of American life and literature full of startling insights, with passages of superb prose.” Mr. Mumford also has a say about this work: “Dahlberg reaches depths of perceptions that very few writers in America can claim.” And Waldo Frank: “Dahlberg has achieved a real literature with his vision.”

As for myself, I am under the disadvantage with regard to *Do These Bones Live* that I cannot make out what it is about or whose bones are in question. There are a lot of people talked about — Whitman, Melville, Shakespeare, Spengler, Christ, Hitler, Poe, and a couple of score of others. About Whitman he reveals:

³ *Do These Bones Live*, by Edward Dahlberg. \$3.00 Harcourt Brace.

He was the innocent, sweet, aromatic, arm-pitted man before the great pollution, the fall, and Edgar Poe was the brand-new Adamic evil, the original Diabolism in a garden.

About Edgar Poe he has mouthfuls to say: "A rathskeller Vulcan, Edgar Poe hammers out upon the smithy of his moaning soul little gothic petroushkas, mechanical horror dolls, Ligeia, Una, Monos." Of Hawthorne: "his most evil pages distil an Edenic miasma instead of rank protoplasm." And here is something about bones in a comment on Georgia O'Keefe's pictures: "Here is a bleached valley of death-shells, rams' skulls, lilies, the whited bones of roses." So obsessed with words is Edward Dahlberg that he doesn't find it necessary to put any argument behind them. After a few lines of tribute to Cologne and Chartres he is moved to inform us "that this immense stone shadow-show is a desperate garbling of first principles." What first principles we don't know. On page 111, he has a dainty bit of meditation on what would have happened "had Christ married that illuminated prostitute, Magdalene." But at this point we are driven to borrow from the Canterbury Tales the line in which mine host stopped the tale of Sir Thopas — "No more of this, for Goddes' dignitee."

II

It may be that after the foregoing any book would seem a miracle of sane thinking, but the fact is that Allen Tate's *Reason in Madness*⁴ would seem so in any circumstances. It is one of the most accomplished volumes of criticism that has appeared in many a day, backed by hard thinking and sound scholarship. The opening essay, called "The Present Function of Criticism," puts forward what will seem to many startling ideas. In effect, Allen Tate believes that in a few years or a few months we shall be living in a totalitarian society, that the tradition of free ideas has been suffering a slow extinction for a generation, and that it may receive the *coup de grace* from the present war, that the suppression of the critical spirit in this country will have even more sinister features than under the Nazi censorship, for "we have a tradition of irresponsible interpretation of patriotic necessity."

Now, the expression of such ideas demands a cool intellectual courage of the kind modern democracy has most need of. Like Mr. MacLeish, Allen Tate ponders on what the future will think of the men who wrote the books and formed the

⁴ *Reason in Madness*, by Allen Tate. \$2.50. Putnam.

minds of this age. We have, he concludes, come under the influence of the sociologists, the positivists, the pragmatists who have taught us that the greatest thing about man was not his intelligence but his adjustment to society. The old heroic idea of conquest of environment has disappeared, and "adaptation" and "adjustment" are the catchwords in education in our time. It may be indeed, as Allen Tate believes, that the bulk of us are being nicely conditioned to becoming members of a slave state. What should criticism have done?

The function of criticism should have been in our time, as in all times, to maintain and demonstrate the special, unique, and complete knowledge which the great forms of literature afford us.

I am not sure that I understand this. Allen Tate writes as if we were still in one of the powerful ages of literature when it did indeed reveal to readers the experiences of the age they lived in. But how few modern writers have expressed and interpreted our particular experience? I should say that the business of criticism, or one of its businesses, is to explain to the public that the books they read in our time very seldom belong to the art of literature and that no especial knowledge of man's experience

could be expected of them except in a very diluted way. Undoubtedly Allen Tate's is a fine, virile, free mind; but it is a little chilly; and the literature he prefers is likely to be on the over-intellectual side — the poetry with too much imagery, as under-emotionalized poetry is likely to have, the criticism that stays too long inside the realm of philosophical speculation, the thinking that is apt to become intellectual gymnastics. If the literary critic is to have an effect on his time he must be clear and plain about his matter. The way to write clearly is not, as the old saw has it, to think clearly, but to think clearly and feel strongly. It is thin emotion that leaves expression unclear.

The last of this group, books all dealing in one way or another with the bewilderments of today and with approaches to a new order, is a new volume of poems by W. H. Auden, *The Double Man*.⁵ Auden is a remarkable figure in our day: a typical exile in a century of exiles, he has prepared himself, has disciplined himself, to meet the issues as few of his contemporaries have. This whole epoch of useless wars and futile revolutions and hunted peoples has bewildered his mind as

⁵ *The Double Man*, by W. H. Auden. \$2.00. Random House.

it has those of nearly everybody else, but he has brought himself to a point where he knows what to do. —

To set in order — that's the task
Both Eros and Apollo ask;
For Art and Life agree in this
That each intends a synthesis,
That order must be the end
That all self-loving things intend
Who struggle for their liberty,
Who use, that is, their will to be.

Yeats, it might be said, revealed more of the experiences of our time in three or four stanzas of the chorus of his play, *The Resurrection*; but Yeats had reached his prime and Auden is in process of development, and it is because he shows the process that he is so exciting. If Eliot has learned from the Metaphysicals, Auden has learned how to order his experience from Jonathan Swift. In *The Double Man* he has taken on that verse, the octasyllabic, into which Swift packed so much, and in which he wrote that marvellous poem:

Amazed, confused, its fate unknown,
The World stood trembling at Jove's throne. . . .

An amazed, confused world whose fate is unknown — that is the matter of Auden's poem, of his notes, and of the odd sonnets that conclude the volume. The long poem, in a metre that permits both vigor and tense statement, is the testa-

ment of a man who has felt, who has endured, who has thought, and has brought himself to a place where there is some solution for the complicated enigma.



BEGIN HERE: *A Statement of Faith*, by Dorothy L. Sayers. \$2.00. *Harcourt Brace*. The author, detective-story writer and dramatist, has a fine power of exposition. She shows what has happened in West European-Mediterranean society and what needs to be done to prevent the self-destruction of that society; specifically what is to be done in the England of today. Naturally she does not furnish any finished plan, but she gives a clear-sighted and understanding program — in fact, one of the few that have come out of the crisis in our civilization.

FRANCE SPEAKING, by Robert de Saint Jean. \$2.50. *Dutton*. By far the most able and knowledgeable book yet written explaining the fall of France and the success of Germany. My conviction is that this account of the debacle by a thoroughly trained journalistic mind is the clearest we are likely to get in our time.

BIRD ISLANDS DOWN EAST, by Helen Gere Cruickshank. \$2.50. *Macmillan*. An account of experiences and observations among the puffins, petrels, cormorants and other birds that breed on the islands off Maine. This simple unpretentious narrative, by virtue of its earnest good-hearted enthusiasm and the great interest of its matter, remains excellent reading for the ornithologically-minded. — A. D.