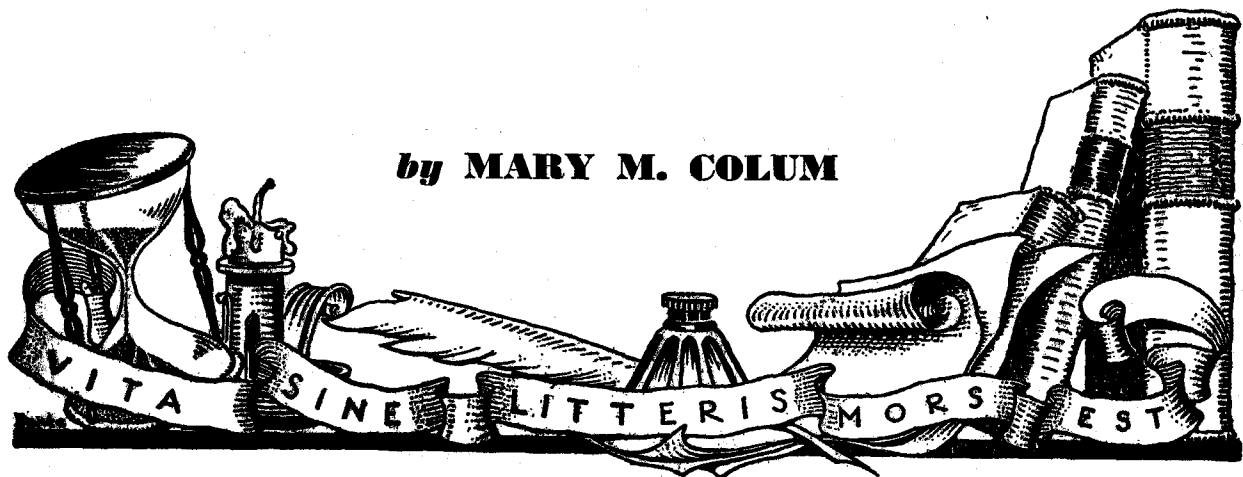


# Life and Literature

*Language, Art, and War\**



by MARY M. COLUM

**T**HERE ARE three interests that the mind of man is constantly occupied with—language, art, and war. Every half-century or so some few minds get wrought up about the problem of reshaping language, of developing language to fit new conditions. Those of my readers who have studied what are called the romance languages and their beginnings will remember how eventful it was considered when the lingo that developed from the Latin of Caesar's soldiers in Gaul was first boldly used as the language of a written document. It could not have been a very colorful document, for its title translated is just "The Strassburg Oaths." Then there was a courageous preacher who daringly used the same lingo from his pulpit because it and not the conventional Latin was the language really familiar to his congregation. These were two of the events of history, for the speech thus used afterwards became the French language.

Of course the present-day excitement about the reshaping of language is of a different nature, and it varies considerably with the types of mind which concern themselves about it. For instance, Stuart Chase's *The Tyranny of Words* is concerned almost entirely with the

literature of information, while the book which the English critic, I. A. Richards, published last year, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, concerns itself mainly with imaginative literature. Also, some fifteen years ago, I. A. Richards, with a collaborator, C. K. Ogden, brought out a book, entitled *The Meaning of Meaning*, which future grammarians may look back to. All this concern with the meaning of words and sentences has a remarkable name: it is called semantics, the art or science of communication.

It would be a great pity to presume, though I think Stuart Chase largely presumes it, that a spoken or written sentence should convey the same meaning to the hearer or reader as to the utterer or writer. In high literature, in poetry especially, this can very seldom be so; in fact, the minute anybody produces a sentence that is an expression of his own temperament, that has the stamp of his own mind, it is likely to mean something a trifle different to everybody.

Anyhow, a sentence that has the stamp of mind and temperament is bound to have some meaning, whereas the bulk of written or oral statements intended to convey information means almost nothing at all today. For instance, we have all been overwhelmed with what purports to be information about communism and fascism. But how many of us have any clear idea what these terms mean? We don't have to know the meaning of

*Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn*

\* EDITOR'S NOTE:—The recent books discussed by Mrs. Colum in this article are: *The Tyranny of Words*, by Stuart Chase (Harcourt, Brace, \$2.50); *My New World*, by Abbé Ernest Dimnet (Simon & Schuster, \$2.50); *Rodin*, by Judith Cladel (Harcourt, Brace, \$3.75); *Christopher Marlowe*, by John Bakeless (Morrow, \$3.50); *Heroes and Beasts of Spain*, by Manuel Chaves Nogales (Doubleday, Doran, \$2.50); *Italy Against the World*, by George Martelli (Macmillan, \$4.00).

## LIFE AND LITERATURE

with definiteness but we ought to know with some approach to exactness what *communism* and *fascism* mean, because they are being, in every country, attached to groups of people. Yet Stuart Chase inquired of nearly 100 persons what *fascism* meant to them, what kind of picture came into their minds when they heard the word, and from the list of answers that he gives it is clear that no two individuals had the same reaction to the term.

He is of the opinion that if people had a training in semantics they would tolerate neither this meaninglessness nor any sort of supreme political dictator. But what people want from the utterance of dictators is a sense of security, a rousing feeling of power and importance, and not meanings analyzable in terms of reason. Tested by such a reaction, speeches by Mussolini and Hitler are real and stirring communications. We may not need such communications in this country but, if we want clear information about dictators and about organizations like fascism and communism, we have difficulty in getting it, for most writers and speakers on these matters have no real training in reaching meanings and no real interest in communicating them. Of course, back of all language, back of all communication we inevitably reach the art or science of psychology.

### WHENCE CAME THE WORD?

I HOPE MY readers will be indulgent if I give a brief account of my own incursion into semantics. I was first inducted into this realm by James Joyce, who took me to the discourses of a French scholar, the Abbé Jousse, who is concerned with the reshaping of language and meaning. His was a different mentality from that of the English I. A. Richards or the American Stuart Chase: he was more concerned with pure literature.

"It is said," announced the Abbé, "that in the beginning was the word. No," he declared. "In the beginning was the rhythmic gesture. From the rhythmic gesture came the word."

And he brought on the stage from which he was speaking a group of people who acted out one of the Gospels in rhythmic gestures accompanied by language. When a woman approached the Lord with gestures of head, hands, and knees and uttered words in a to me unknown tongue, Hebrew or Aramaic, from

the gestures, from the sounds, I not only knew what the Gospel was but got a sense of vivid and poignant language which conveyed a direct meaning.

But then the question inevitably rose: What was the state of mind behind the rhythmic gestures which produced these words? And there one came to psychology, to the mysteries of the workings of the mind and emotions, and I felt, stupidly enough, as if I were going out by the same door as in I went — but I could see why the Abbé Jousse is a prophet to many of the modernist writers concerned with the worn-out state of language.

In what, for the authors of *The Meaning of Meaning*, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, *The Tyranny of Words*, does the semantic discipline consist? Simply in being aware that clear communication demands referent, reference, and symbol — all three. Now the word *referent* was used by Ogden and Richards to mean the object or situation in the real world to which a word or label refers. What is generally left out in statements that are short on communication is the referent. For example, if we say, "Mankind has a spark of the divine," the referent is left in the air — there is, according to Stuart Chase, no such entity as mankind. For myself, I am not sure but that mankind is not a good enough referent.

The drawback to *The Tyranny of Words*, though it is an exciting and interesting book, is that the author has a nonphilosophic mind; and, though this will help to popularize his ideas on semantics, it is bound, in the end, to limit his influence. He once wrote a work entitled *Your Money's Worth*, and what he is doing in *The Tyranny of Words* is asking readers and hearers to insist that they get their money's worth in meaning. Now this is a valuable service, but, when he comes to dealing with ideas, he falls into the sort of error that he himself has been declaiming against.

Take, for instance, this passage:

The notion of "original sin" is one of the most troublesome ever contrived. It assumes that men will get into mischief unless they are chronically unhappy, worked long hours, rigidly disciplined and filled with a sense of inferiority.

Now where is the referent here? Is it *men*? But in Europe the men who believe in original sin work for the greater part in fields and little businesses that they own, do not drive them-

selves too hard, have little sense of inferiority, are not overdisciplined, and, except during wars, generally have a fairly happy time. The men that Stuart Chase has constantly on his mind are metropolitan and industrial groups whose members seem to be pragmatists and behaviorists and always consumers. Nevertheless, *The Tyranny of Words* is a book which could very well take the place of grammars in high schools and colleges.

### EDUCATION AND CIVILIZATION

IT MAY SEEM old-fashioned, but I am inclined to believe that part of the looseness in communication of many modern writers is due to a lack of training in the classics — or, anyhow, in Latin. A writer drilled in the classics as was Abbé Ernest Dimnet can always communicate clearly and memorably. Whole tomes on the difference between American education and civilization and the European could not leave as much definite communication with the reader as the Abbé's two books, *My Old World* and *My New World*.

One of the main differences between America and Europe is in the discipline of the schools. In Europe this is always a monastic discipline or the relics of a monastic discipline, even, as Bertrand Russell has pointed out, in the schools of a Protestant country like England or northern Germany. This discipline produces a temper, and this temper produces a civilization, so that one might really grasp what the whole of English civilization has stood for from a study of a few English public schools and what French civilization has stood for from a study of a few well-known French schools and colleges. All such disciplines may now be reaching their end — though I doubt it — but a student of civilizations should always, I believe, begin with schools.

The discipline of the young Dimnet's school may seem no less than ghastly to Americans, and ghastly (as I can testify, for I have been through a like discipline) in some respects it was. One boarding school in Europe is much like another, remaining unchanged generation after generation, though they may be changing more since the War. I belonged to another generation from the Abbé's, but my discipline was so similar to what he describes that reading his pages makes me shiver. The cold in winter, the chilblains, the unscientific diet (all

supposed to be good for the spirit), the long hours of lessons, the short hours of recreation brought some of us to an early death and the rest of us to an almost invalid state for the rest of our lives. The early rising hours, then the slight and dismal breakfast, after one had already been up from one and a half to two and a half hours, sapped one's vitality sometimes forever.

The attitude toward education of the teaching staff was partly that it was a preparation for life but chiefly that it was a preparation for our last end and for the hour when we were to be judged by the Almighty. And what was the school curriculum? "Too much literature," says Abbé Dimnet. And that was the trouble with a lot of schools in Europe: There was an overplus of literature in many languages — all right, of course, if the aim was to turn everyone into a writer. But, with all such drawbacks, there was something in that steady discipline, that never ceasing drill in ethics and the humanities, that did leave in its victims a power for coping with life, with all the ups and downs of life, that a gentler training rarely achieves.

The Abbé's criticism of America is conveyed with such grace, such genuine affection for the country that nobody could be offended even if Americans had not passed the stage of resenting foreign criticism. Some of his criticism represents a common European criticism of Americans: that, though they are more kindly than Europeans, they are less profound in their affection; that they want happiness above everything else — happiness which to Europeans is a by-product rather than something to be aimed at directly; that Americans want to forget or ignore the unpleasant, that they forget the dead as soon as it is decent, while Europeans remember and remember. Do the Europeans care more profoundly than Americans, or is it all an illusion or a habit of mind or a convention?

Readers will feel that the Abbé Dimnet's books are written out of affection and by a man who has had few frustrations. This impression is very rarely given in contemporary writing, and it endows the Abbé's books with a companionableness that is delightful for the reader. On the whole the author seems to have had a well-filled, which means a happy, life.



### UNHAPPY GENIUS

**B**UT WOULD THIS have been true of him if he had been amongst the great artists or the great philosophers? Maybe the reason that the modern world is striving to make itself mediocre is that it considers happiness the most desirable of all the things, for the too highly gifted are certainly not the happy.

While Auguste Rodin lived, he seemed to those who heard of him and who knew something of his work to be a kind of sovereign, producing prodigious works of art, surrounded by the great of the earth — statesmen and beautiful women, artists and writers — with governments giving him grand mansions to work in, with famous cities competing for his statues, while an intellectual elite fought battles for him. And now, through an accomplished biography of him by Judith Cladel, we see that this sovereign of our imaginations was, like all great artists, overworked, nervously strained, pitifully unable to cope with his own emotions and with the people who wished to draw sustenance from his genius and his humanity.

Toward the end of his days, he wrote:

We live a life of our own invention and when it is ended and has proved difficult we learn what was wrong by remembering the religious instruction we laughed at in our youth.

Perhaps one of the morals of this biography, indeed of all biographies or autobiographies of real artists and real philosophers, of the elite of mankind, is that such people can have little happiness as happiness is understood by ordinary humanity. Goethe in his old age said that he did not remember that he had had one happy day. The real artist or philosopher is not one who produces art or philosophy incidentally and thereby gives an interest or color to his own life and that of others; but he is one who immerses himself in these things, and is continuously burdened with them to the detriment of the simple human values that give happiness.

*Rodin* is written by one who knew the sculptor intimately, who served him in his later years, and who has the skill of an effective novelist. It shows us a man who slaved for years for a pittance that no workingman of today would be content with. For Rodin, even when he was well enough known to have back-

ing for his immense *La Porte de L'enfer*, had to practice such economy that he wore paper collars and cuffs which, when discarded, he gave to his son to make drawings on. (This was the son of the workingwoman whom he lived with for 50 years and whom he formally married only at the end of his life.) Judith Cladel's history of a great creator's life reveals a man who had an immense power of contemplation in everything that concerned his art and but few workable ideas as regards the life he shared with others. He who brought order out of blocks and metal could bring but little order to his household or his friendships, and his last days were shadowed by quarreling relatives, by bribed servants, by interlopers who were bent on plundering him of his own work. One of his most discussed statues is of Balzac: what a wonderful and pathetic novel Balzac could have made of Rodin's days!

### MARLOWE OF THE MIGHTY LINE

**W**HEN A GREAT artist like Rodin dies, not everything in his work lives on; something in it dies with the death of the creator, and those who come afterward do not quite know it as contemporaries knew it. We can never know the plays of the Elizabethans as the most unlettered of the groundlings knew them once. But as much as a man can do to make us intimate with the life and genius of "that Elementall Wit" who was Christopher Marlowe, John Bakeless has done. He writes about him as if he had known him personally and he makes us understand what at the back of Marlowe's mind made him write always, except once, about men of power and what lay behind the intense emotions — never romantic or amorous emotions — that he put into his great lines.

There are good men and true who would give up all Shakespeare ever wrote for a few plays of Marlowe. And this is partly because he wrote short, swift plays around one powerful figure — Faust or Tamburlaine or the Jew of Malta — in verse lines of such intensity and directness that it is not easy for the mind to wander from them in the way that even the most attentive minds will wander from masterpieces. If he never, like Shakespeare, could write the tale of a world well lost for love, he wrote what for many is a more fascinating story, the story of a damned soul who thought heaven well lost for the sin he committed.

## THE FORUM

John Bakeless has got hold of one of the most complex characters in the whole of English literature, a man whose personality is so stamped on his lines that every one is a sort of personal revelation. It is true that Marlowe was not really a man of the theater as was Shakespeare, as John Bakeless points out in a comparison between the death speech Marlowe gives Tamburlaine and the death speech Shakespeare gives Antony, where every word conveys the gasp of the dying man. But he was a great rhetorical poet, and his plays are closer to the French classical drama than those of any of the other Elizabethans.

A striking point in John Bakeless' biography is that he is actually able to place Marlowe in an age that was still the Renaissance and not quite the romantic age that was Shakespeare's. Everything in Marlowe's life, including the writing of his plays, was, he shows, an adventure; he broke into new territory; he exploited new verse forms, a whole new feeling about words and verse, and the new knowledge that the scholars of the Renaissance had just attained to. And he was not only a remarkable scholar and a great poet but also a bravo and maybe a spy — for Elizabethan England seems to have been as full of spies as Soviet Russia. He was killed in a tavern brawl with a dagger which, as the coroner recorded, cost twelve-pence. The new material about Marlowe given in this book is altogether significant and interesting and makes it at once the most scholarly and exciting biography I have read in years.

### MOST FUTILE OF ALL WARS

A GREAT ARTIST, Francisco de Goya, over 100 years ago made some etchings of a war in Spain which are collectively named *The Disasters of War*, and the ferocity shown in Goya's etchings is revealed again in the pages of the book entitled *Heroes and Beasts of Spain*. The author, Manuel Chaves Nogales, like Goya, does not take sides: his heroes and beasts are both communists and fascists — or whatever are the right labels for the opposing forces in present-day Spain. For the author of this collection of stories both armies are nothing better than gangs, though he does acknowledge that there is enthusiasm among the government forces for the proletarian revolution. Nogales was once the liberal editor of various newspapers in

Madrid; the last he edited was taken over by a revolutionary committee. "When I no longer considered I could help them, they let me go in peace," he tells us in the preface. "Terror made life impossible and blood was choking me," and so he left Spain and is now living in France.

To read any one of the nine stories of his collection is to be made to realize that the civil war in Spain is a very different affair from that of the correspondents' dispatches or that of the various volunteers' accounts of "what the Civil War in Spain has done for me." One of the stories, named "The Treasures of Briesca," seems somehow to be an epitome of all the wars that are now going on; it tells about an obscure young painter who devotedly tries to save a couple of El Grecos and a few illuminated manuscripts. He hides them, and then disillusionment falls on him, and he thinks that maybe no art is worth saving. Before he is killed he makes a sketch of a dying militiaman which will be a clue to the hiding place of the art treasures when a better day comes for Spain. The sketch is bought by an American, who will never know that with a few dollars he has bought what no one will be able to decipher — the secret of a treasure of Spain.

It is a remarkable fact that many intellectual Spaniards like Nogales and Madariaga have no belief in either side engaged in the civil war. But most outsiders hold strong convictions on one side or the other. The English publicist Arnold Lunn is strictly partisan in his *Rehearsal in Spain*; he takes the point of view that the popular-front government is totally in the wrong and that the groups upholding Franco are wholly in the right.

"The seeds of the new pest which first germinated in Asia's rotten soil," passionately writes Nogales in the preface to his stories, "were sent to Spain via Moscow, Rome, and Berlin labelled with the words 'communism,' 'fascism,' 'Naziism.'"

Arnold Lunn will have it that only the seeds that came via Moscow were pestilent, and he puts forward the pleasant idea that the civil war in Spain is but a rehearsal for a war that will take place all over Europe, a war inspired and prepared for by Moscow.

Another English publicist, John Langdon-Davies, on the other hand informed us some time ago that the popular-front parties are

absolutely in the right and that the other side is absolutely in the wrong.

With all these books, one can't help a conviction that some of the numerous League of Nations committees ought to order all non-Spaniards out of Spain and declare a moratorium on book writing about the Spanish war—for the reason that, of all the pestilences connected with this particularly atrocious war, the luxuriating in emotions about it by outsiders is one of the worst.

### A LOST EMPIRE

AFTER PERUSING our quota of books on the war in Spain, it is really like breathing clear air to read *Italy Against the World*, by George Martelli. The title is likely to give a wrong impression: this is not a piece of Fascist propaganda but an impartial, eloquent, and thought-provoking account of how a war was promoted and accomplished and how games played in European chancelleries frustrated attempts to halt that war.

The hero of the book is really Haile Selassie. We get the impression of a great aristocrat surrounded by a lot of gangsters who understood neither his principles nor his traditions nor his simple belief that the head of a nation must keep his word.

When he appeared before the League of Nations, which he had trusted, he spoke words that were pregnant with dignity:

I, Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, am here today to claim that justice that is due to my people and the assistance promised to it eight months ago by fifty-two nations who asserted that an act of aggression had been committed in violation of international treaties.

The book reveals the tragic fact that those

representatives of 52 nations who met in Geneva do not seem to be able to do anything about preventing a war. They could not prevent the war against Ethiopia, and the ancient empire of Prester John became part of Italy, while the Emperor took refuge in London.

There is an account of the newspapermen's meeting with the conquered sovereign that reaches a high level in communication:

In the conventionally furnished sittingroom of the new Legation in Prince's Gate, empty beer bottles strewn the table at which the journalists had regaled themselves while awaiting the Emperor's appearance. A noisy crowd pushed through the door and thronged the hall and stairway.

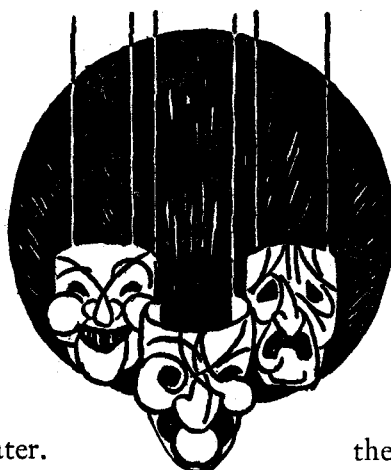
Then the Emperor appeared.

The effect was electrical. The sudden silence was like the hush that descends on a turbulent schoolroom at the entrance of a respected master. The aristocratic features and slight stature of Haile Selassie must be familiar now to most readers. It is difficult to imagine greater natural dignity. But the expression was like stone. When the lips moved to utter a few words in French they seemed to be actuated by some mechanical process in which all emotion was frozen. Only the eyes lived, taking in all and giving forth nothing.

The great lesson of *Italy Against the World* is that the well-intentioned pacifists are amateurs who go about their business in a way which means just nothing at all to the professionals who are either engaged in promoting war or in using the well-meant peace efforts to further their own national policies. Perhaps Stuart Chase is right, and a discipline in semantics might prevent the well-intentioned from being completely bamboozled, for then they might comprehend what is really meant by the language of international treaties and the pronouncements of the League of Nations.



# The Theater Forum



**W**ITHOUT tragedy an age has only half a theater. This well-supported axiom applies with special emphasis to our recent New York theater. The past four weeks, which have not revealed a single considerable tragedy but have abounded in musical comedy and sentiment, illustrate the trend. That musical comedy, in particular, has achieved rare excellence is encouraging but does not affect the picture, with all that it implies.

Broadway would not be Broadway without such musical fare as *Between the Devil*, an old stand-by that is gladly dressed, well acted, and fairly tuneful. Against this comedy of bigamy with its self-styled "trail of lust" (not even very lustful, alas) we can, however, set the intelligent antics of *Pins and Needles*, a revue that riddles the social body delightfully, and *Hooray for What!*, which plays havoc with our war industries, with peace conferences not excluded. Both are expertly projected, the one by amateurs of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, which makes the performance all the more remarkable, the other by veterans who prove that one can set their svelte talent to better use than usual. Both bridge the wholly arbitrary gap between entertainment and enlightenment, which is one of the impediments to arresting and truly joyous theater.

Without throwing a puritanical wet blanket on the value of comedy, it must be noted, however, that its nature is negative. Satire is an express negation; and what is humor, after all, but an exposure of the unheroic and the incongruous, even if it heals our wounded narcissism with kindness? Although the uses of comedy need as little defense as breathing, it tells only half the story, which is never complete without its sequel, tragedy.

Symptomatic of our times, in which there is

much to castigate or ridicule and little to believe, is the fact that exposure and anti-heroism should prevail while the more elevating resources of the spirit are left by the wayside or only

tentatively drawn through the theater's thoroughfares. Sentiment of the moderate sort which characterizes Miss Cornelia Otis Skinner's *Edna His Wife* results in a remarkable solo performance by its principal, worth a visit to the Little Theatre. But only our debased popular taste would confuse its invertebrate sorrows with tragedy. And even mild laments like this one have been outnumbered in the past few weeks by the musicals and the so-called straight comedies, of which the dramatization of *Barchester Towers* was the only example to prove worth mentioning.

The ambitious efforts of our serious theater, plays like *Golden Boy* and *Of Mice and Men*, discussed in the last issue, do of course approach tragedy. Still, for all their merits, these pieces remain bogged in social or clinical case history and simply lack the passion and illumination of tragedy. And more literal social drama, like Irwin Shaw's recently revealed and quickly interred drama of the civil war in Spain, *Siege*, barely scratches the surface of tragic experience. The motives or convictions behind activity and action's effect on the individual alone can transfigure physical struggle into drama. Irwin Shaw, who effected such a transfiguration in portions of *Bury the Dead*, made some effort to trace the deterioration of a hero and the conversion of a pacifist to militancy but without endowing his characters with magnitude. Never central in his drama, they never mattered, while his ill-chosen situation — a siege — necessarily threw the emphasis on static fortitude rather than on dynamic action.