

The Artist's Point of View

Again I Try to Slay a Dragon—in Macy's Everyday Parade

THERE ARE still with us today two dragons (at least) whose great, lumbering bodies sprawl over the American landscape. They are vicious, powerful monsters, these dragons. I know, for I, as a self-appointed St. George, have been trying in vain to slay both of them for a dozen years or more. But their hides are thick — too thick to slay. My heaviest javelin, hurled with all the verbal force I can muster, when it hits the beasts at all, merely irritates some surface spot for a moment, and is immediately forgotten.

One dragon, Antiquarian Mind, clogs progress by the sheer bulk of its inert matter. The other, Profit Motive, kills progress by fiery blasts and destroying claws, which reach into every hamlet and city street and home of this great nation.

Antiquarian Mind I have javelined sufficiently in former articles — on Mellon, the Metropolitan Museum, the Jefferson memorial. Today, just one lusty thrust at Profit Motive as it affects American culture in the arts applied to life.

Almost any ad of furnishings or decoration in a "classy" magazine will serve as a case study. Here's one of Macy's, from the *New Yorker*, on its Forward House 1938. I quote:

FORWARD HOUSE MARCHES FORWARD

Macy's Forward House 1938 unfolds a new, slender, elegant modern compounded of Baroque curves, traditional motifs, the exquisite inlays of old world furniture and the fundamental simplicity of true Modern.

Do you get the implications? Please read it again. Now, let's analyze.

Business, we must remember, is *in* business to make profits and for no other reason. In merchandising, the surest guarantee of profit is to please the greatest and offend the smallest number of people. In furniture, the greatest number of Americans still like antiques; therefore the furniture department must please the backward-looking antiquarians in its dealing with a *forward*-looking or modern style which in its honest manifestation denies every tenet of antiquarian faith.

"... modern compounded of Baroque

curves, traditional motifs . . . and the fundamental simplicity of the modern." Can that be done? Can oil and water mix? Can night be day? Can "modern" be compounded out of the things of which it is the antithesis? Of course, claims Macy's copywriter. Just average the words and the design. Hit a happy medium. Avoid extremes. Label compromise "marching forward!" And, presto! everyone is pleased and flattered, and everyone buys.

These businessmen assume, you see, that the vast majority of us who read the *New Yorker* and *Vogue* and all the other upper-class magazines are so aesthetically ignorant that we will not see the joker, will not be offended, will agree, and will buy. They are shrewd. They know their majority. And *they are right*. The small minority who take offense can safely be ignored.

It is a truism to say that this power of profit dominates our fare in all the arts where profit, especially in the higher brackets, controls production. We all know it. We know radio and movies as star examples and we know that all art fields are tainted. Jerome Davis analyzes causes and effects in his book, *Capitalism and Its Culture*. Anyone who does not know can here find all the evidence.

I revert to the old dragon symbol to describe this invincible power over our lives which dictates our economic and aesthetic malnutrition. To medieval minds the word *dragon* symbolized superpower, unconquerable by man without divine aid. Today divine aid is elusive, and the St. Georges lack big guns. Defeat, therefore, is inevitable on the general front. But, as I have so often argued, any one person or group (including the co-operatives) can escape the fiery breath in merchandise by refusing to buy the thing which it has tainted — including Macy's misnamed Forward House. He can buy instead genuine creations. Knowledge plus action is dangerous and is the only big gun which can slay a segment, at least, of a dragon. That's why some of us keep on writing, I suppose, and buying as shrewdly as we can.

RALPH M. PEARSON

A Page for Poets

Personal Reasons for Poetry

by JEAN STARR UNTERMAYER



1 BLACKBIRD what a boy you are!
How you do go it!
Blowing your bugle to that one sweet
star —
How you do blow it!
And does she hear you, blackbird boy,
so far?
Or is it wasted breath?
“Good Lord! she is so bright
Tonight!”
The blackbird saith.

Here in nine short lines, T. E. Brown has stated the case for the disinterested artist far more convincingly than it would be put forth in the same number of pages of the most persuasive prose. The Philistine questions skeptically, though gently,

And does she hear you, blackbird boy,
so far?
Or is it wasted breath?

This is the voice of the material world: “Is it worth while?” There is, there can be, only one answer from the true poet. He sings because he must. His wonder compels it. For this he was born, to celebrate what he loves —

Good Lord! she is so bright
Tonight!

Poetry, paradoxical as it may seem, is an affair of the most personal and, at the same time, the least personal implications. For any real poetry to be created there must be the utmost in-driving concentration of all the poet's powers. But this intensification of attention has a strange result.

And now I must try to make plain my own experience, which has been fortified by analogous experiences in the lives of other poets. When I say “utmost in-driving concentration,” I do so in an effort to crystallize a repeated experience. But I find that it is better done by description. Before a poem takes shape but when in a tantalizing, vague, and troubling way it is asking to be given shape, it seems as if something — a presence, a picture, an essence — were enclosed within a wall. The wall — a circular wall without an apparent opening — is one's mundane self, the physical integument, the sum of one's external concerns. With this self, the presence within seems to have little to do. At the moment when it becomes imperative to capture the elusive presence within this wall, then the will — or something stronger than what we ordinarily call the

will — focuses one's united powers into an assault upon the wall. The obdurate mass gives at one point, and lo! one is inside. And what one thought was a roofed tower is open at the top on a visible sky. Once within, there is an ineffable sense of unity — with the sought presence and with the soul of all things. Also with one's own soul, its identity verified but not isolated. Rather now it becomes related to other souls — almost, one would say to all other souls.

What seemed trapped within now makes free of the air. In a sense it is the air — or like the air — the common property of all men. Because now it has become condensed to one apprehension. And what seemed exclusively one's own — some experience, some emotions, some lightning stroke of the mind — finds, when the poem takes shape, its answer and echo in the breasts of others. But, until the experience is truly felt and unerringly communicated, it is not poetry, however neatly it is confined in verse forms.

“INSPIRATION”

I WAS a small girl in an Ohio town when I read Israel Zangwill's *Dreamers of the Ghetto*. I do not remember any of the stories distinctly, although I can recall the vague outlines of one in which a child was born blind because the pregnant mother was half starved. I have never read the book since but I know that it made a powerful appeal to my emotions, caused a revolt against things as they were (or seemed to be), and brought into being certain moral questions that have never since been silenced or finally answered.

I started to write an essay: Which was the more valuable — the Dreamer or the Doer — or, in other words, the poet or the practical man? For the first time in my life I was conscious of that seizure we call inspiration. At that moment nothing in the world seemed important but grasping those indefinite but immeasurably forceful emotions and imprisoning them in words, so that I could bring them outside myself, look at them, consider them, and probe them in order to relax a kind of swollen tension that not only conditioned the mind and emotions but worked on the whole nervous system so that my body itself felt taut. Once I had got my feelings into thoughts and my thoughts on paper, I had the

sense of weary but happy relief and lightness. I have over and over again experienced similar sensations.

And now I realize that for some 30 odd years that first dialogue has been extending itself and inclining me not only to a choice of art but also to a way of life. Nature had predisposed me to the side of the dreamer — the poet. The most immediate and intense reactions to sensory stimuli had simultaneously linked up in my soul to other implications — the nature of which a child had no means of divining. Glorious as the world of sense might be, it still bore blemishes, and I had in me intimations or memories of a perfected world. To this perfect world I aspired — but never entirely with a good conscience. For it seemed (though I could never reconcile it with any reasons — the daily maxims of my parents and teachers that it was wrong to waste time in idleness and day-dreaming were reasons that constrained but never convinced me) that, when I turned entirely away from what is called the real world, I was both cowardly and disloyal. And now after many years I see that the attempt to *live* poetry — to bring into manifestation something of the Platonian “good, true and beautiful” was somehow an act of faith, my effort to reconcile and resolve a duality of which I first became conscious so many years ago.

So, to me, poetry is not a limited mode of writing but rather a condition of living of which the writing is the testament. It begins in an awareness of eternal things — an awareness only heightened by the impact of the physical world, that has meaning in and beyond itself.

A tree, for example, in itself is a good sight. The uses of a tree apart from its beauty, the significance that can be attached to it, the analogies to other growths in nature and to the character of man the wonder it awakens as one of an infinite variety in the panorama of trees, and finally the thought of the intelligence, the love, and the divine artistry that created it. What is disparity becomes identity to the poet.

As Humbert Wolfe makes one of his characters in *Monologues and Dialogues* say, “There is nothing in the world that has not a genuine significance. The poet elicits that significance and relates it to something beyond itself and beyond his own mind.”