

LIFE, LETTERS, AND THE ARTS

GREAT PROSE AGAIN

Not long ago we quoted in this department a writer in the *Times Literary Supplement* who, in reviewing the *Oxford Book of English Prose*, pointed out that in the greatest prose we are always aware of a certain freshness and directness in the use of images which we miss in the prose of second-rate or minor authors. This writer quoted a passage from Mr. Lytton Strachey which he accused, with perfect justice, of tameness and confusion in the use of metaphors and half-metaphorical expressions. 'She herself, as she lay blind and silent, seemed to those who watched her to be divested of all thinking — to have glided already, unawares, into oblivion.' The writer of a sentence like this cannot have said of him what Emerson said of Montaigne: 'Cut one of his words and it will bleed.' 'Divested' is a false image for 'ceasing to think,' since thought at the best is hardly to be compared to a garment; and 'glided into oblivion' is every orator's phrase.

But Mr. James Joyce, whom this writer quoted with approval as a prose stylist with a first-hand sense of metaphor, is not the only contemporary who may be said to be writing great prose — in these terms at least. In an article on Mrs. Virginia Woolf in *The Nation and the Athenæum* Mr. Edwin Muir quotes a passage from her recent novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, that illustrates not only her command over an 'original' imagery but also her subtle sense of prose rhythm. (Mr. Strachey's rhythms are pleasant, and

even stately, but they are all derivative.) This is the passage — in which Mrs. Woolf describes Clarissa Dalloway sewing her green dress: —

Quiet descended upon her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying 'That is all' more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says, too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away barking and barking.

'In the daring and fullness of the metaphors,' says Mr. Muir of the passage, 'it has a remote indebtedness to Homer.' Certainly there is great daring in the sudden, but unobtrusive, transition here from the green folds of Clarissa's dress to the waves of the sea, and great beauty in the use of that image to suggest the elusive mood of half-hypnotic calm and emotional lassitude that has overtaken Mrs. Woolf's heroine.

One need not, however, go outside the covers of the *Oxford Book of English Prose* to find illustrations of the original use of images in great prose. See what a powerful imagination like John Donne's can make with so conventional an idea as the leveling work

of death; like one of Stevenson's conversationalists, Donne uses words so that 'you might think he had worn them next to his skin and slept in them': —

It comes equally to us all, and makes us all equal when it comes. The ashes of an Oak in the Chimney are no Epitaph of that Oak to tell me how high or how large that was; it tells me not what flocks it sheltered while it stood, nor what men it hurt when it fell. The dust of great persons graves is speechless too, it says nothing, it distinguishes nothing: as soon the dust of a wretch whom thou wouldest not, as of a Prince thou couldest not look upon, will trouble thine eyes, if the wind blow it thither; and when a whirlwind hath blown the dust of the Churchyard into the Church, and the man sweeps out the dust of the Church into the Churchyard, who will undertake to sift those dusts again, and to pronounce, This is the Patrician, this is the noble flower, and this the yeomanly, this the Plebeian bran. So is the death of *Jesabel* (*Jesabel* was a Queen) expressed; *They shall not say, this is Jesabel*; not only not wonder that it is, nor pity that it should be, but they shall not say, they shall not know, *This is Jesabel*.

A passage like this shows what a great writer can do by apprehending afresh an old and conventional metaphor — such as ashes and dust for mortality — and, so to speak, taking it seriously. In the following passage from Emerson, in the same book, the chief image is virtually his own. And how sinewy, in general, his language is!

I see not why we should give ourselves such sanctified airs. If the Divine Providence has hid from men neither disease, nor deformity, nor corrupt society, but has stated itself out in passions, in war, in trade, in the love of power and pleasure, in hunger and need, in tyrannies, literatures, and arts, — let us not be so nice that we cannot write these facts down coarsely as they stand, or doubt but there is a counter-statement as ponderous, which we can arrive at, and which, being put, will make all square. The

solar system has no anxiety about its reputation, and the credit of truth and honesty is as safe; nor have I any fear that a sceptical bias can be given by leaning hard on the sides of fate, of practical power, or of trade, which the doctrine of Faith cannot downweigh. The strength of that principle is not measured in ounces and pounds: it tyrannizes at the centre of Nature.

When a writer can clothe abstract ideas of this kind in vivid metaphorical language, he perhaps deserves even more esteem than the Joyces and the Mrs. Woolfs.

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BURGOS CATHEDRAL IN DANGER

'THE critical state of the beautiful Gothic cathedral at Burgos,' says a correspondent of the *Morning Post*, 'is arousing much attention and not a little anxiety in Spain, for it is feared that unless steps are immediately taken this splendid monument of mediæval architecture, the shrine of thousands of pilgrims and wondering visitors from all parts of the world, is doomed to ruin.'

'Built in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and altered in the two succeeding centuries, Burgos Cathedral is one of the chief glories of Spain; yet, strangely enough, it is mainly the work of two foreigners. The original building is supposed to have been erected by the British Bishop Maurice, while the additions of the fifteenth century are the work of John of Cologne. Like so many other Gothic churches, especially those in Germany, — the Mainz Cathedral, for instance, — Burgos Cathedral stands amid a cluster of houses which in all their simplicity still seem to form an integral part of the mass of architecture, with the Cathedral in its elaborate splendor as their head.

'As a result of the ravages of time and weather, much of the stonework of the

towers has crumbled away, and in places the rot has eaten its way wedge-like into the walls. The condition of the building has several times been brought to the notice of the authorities, but through the alleged lack of funds for reparation purposes nothing has so far been accomplished to save the Cathedral.

'The Duke de Alba has now taken up the matter, and in the recent session of the Academia de Bellas Artes he made it perfectly clear that the salvation of the Cathedral depended upon immediate action. His declaration has apparently made the Government stir, for the Minister of Public Instruction has sent a telegram to the new custodian-architect of Burgos Cathedral requesting him to report upon the present condition of the building and to state what measures are necessary for its preservation.

'In the opinion of several engineers and architects it will be possible to save the towers of the Cathedral without destroying and rebuilding. Protests have been received from the Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando and other bodies against any proposal to destroy the work of John of Cologne.'

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POST-REVOLUTIONARY MUSIC IN RUSSIA

THE official *Izvestia* of Moscow prints an interesting account of what the Government-paid reviewer calls 'Revolutionary' music. To receive official approval, it should be said, newly written music in Russia must fill two requirements — it must be accessible to large masses of people, and it must not, in either words or musical construction, hark back to pre-Revolutionary bourgeois ideals and sentiments. Consequently the review that follows covers a comparatively narrow field of observation.

'After a long period without a musi-

cal periodical press,' says the reviewer, 'we have been able to greet simultaneously the rise of two magazines — *Music and Revolution* and *Music and October*. Several articles protest against the tendency to oversimplification, to a vulgarization of Marxism, and speak of the necessity of bringing an understanding of genuine art to large masses of workers, and of giving them a real knowledge of the art of the past. After carefully examining our new vocal agitational music, we conclude that this campaign must not be postponed. The danger comes from those so-called composers who used to serve consumers of pseudo-Gypsy cabaret songs and ditties in the taste of the nouveau riche, and are now having recourse to revolutionary texts; for to write music for the latter has become a more or less profitable occupation. As a result our workers are invited to listen to "Mine Number Three" and other "industrial" masterpieces in which the great ideas of October 1917 are propagated to the accompaniment of operetta or cabaret tunes.

'There is another danger — the poverty of style. Our composers, who are for the most part young people just being trained in composition, create formulas and are loath to part with them. The last choral works of Lobachev repeat one another's made-to-order marchlike manner, and even entire episodes; while the vocal pieces of Karchmarev are a mixture of old-time sentimentalism, pseudo folk-music, Chaikovskii's pathetic increased-sixth, a monotonous minor tone, and various cheap tricks — all of which threatens to educate the musical taste of the worker on things alien to his healthy, upright attitude toward life. These young composers ought to study the cheerful works of Haydn, Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, and the style and polyphony of the real peasant song. Not

until then, and only at the price of steady work, will they be able to give to the workers' clubs healthy musical material.'

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THE KNICKERBOCKER HAMLET IN VIENNA

THE audiences of the Deutsches Volkstheater in Vienna have recently had the opportunity to see the English *Hamlet*-in-dress-clothes acted by Austrian players but produced by an English director, Mr. Harry Ayloff. According to reports, the version has been received enthusiastically by the audiences, but coldly and even harshly by the critics. A writer in the *Neue Freie Presse*, after objecting that the use of modern costume is not necessary to the popularity of a play so steadily performed as *Hamlet*, observes that it is not the costuming of the play that makes this production offensive, but the cold and cynical manner in which it is acted throughout. One had the feeling, he says, of attending some rehearsal in the course of which the actors delivered their parts while eating an occasional ham sandwich.

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A MUSIC MUSEUM

IF books and art works may be made accessible to the public without charge in libraries and art museums, why should not music enjoy the same democratic advantage? The municipal corporation of Berlin believes that it should, and has drafted a bill, to be laid before the Prussian legislature at the present session, providing for the erection of a Museum of Music on a site that it is willing to provide. In this institution good music would be heard by anybody for the trouble of entering — except perhaps on special days of the week, when a small charge might be made for the sake of meeting

part of the expenses. It is intended that the building should have four concert halls; in one, symphony concerts would be given, in another chamber music, in a third vocal music, and in the fourth lectures on musical history and criticism. Perhaps there might also be rooms where the best concerts of the world could be heard by radio, and where phonograph records could be preserved and used. The Prussian Minister of Education believes that, after the site has been provided, the building need not cost more than two million gold marks.

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GALSWORTHY IN CATALONIA

ART and letters have suffered in Catalonia, as well as more temporal considerations. According to the *Courrier Catalan*, the museums of Barcelona have made no acquisitions since the establishment of the Directory, and have ceased to publish a series of monographs on art which they had undertaken. The school of dramatic art founded by the *Mancomunitat* has been threatened by the central authorities. A recent act of the Government verges — like so many dictatorial gestures — on the ridiculous: the performance of Galsworthy's drama, *Strife*, translated into Catalan by Señor Fernandez-Burgas, has been refused sanction, on the ground that it is a piece likely to stir up social and political passions. Well, perhaps it is, to be sure.

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A CORRECTION

It has been brought to our attention that our statement in the issue of May 1 that Miss Sheila Kaye-Smith, 'like Mr. Mackenzie,' is an Anglo-Catholic, was incorrect. Miss Kaye-Smith is an Anglo-Catholic, to be sure, but Mr. Mackenzie is a Roman Catholic, although — we believe — a convert to that faith.

BOOKS ABROAD

Swinburne, by Harold Nicolson. New English Men of Letters series. London and New York: The Macmillan Company. \$1.25.

[Sir Edmund Gosse in the *Sunday Times*]

It gives me no trouble to say without reserve that Mr. Nicolson has penetrated further into the mental constitution of the poet than any of us, his elders, who lived in the clash and flash of the phenomenon, were able to do. The paradox of criticism at the present moment is that certain productions in prose and verse that we looked upon fifty years ago as 'the most exciting thing that ever happened' appear to some members of the youthful generation 'almost unutterably dull.'

That Swinburne could ever be regarded as dull would in 1866 have sounded not more possible than that all the waters of the world should run dry. But the inconceivable has happened. There are large tracts of Swinburne that are like those rich Dutch pastures that the sea has overdriven — they lie knee-deep in sand for ever and ever. I am myself guilty of some apostasy. I shall not be accused of insensibility to the magic of my friend when I frankly admit that the thought of reading 'A Midsummer Holiday' over again makes me physically faint. What has happened is that, while the elect have obstinately refused to admit the existence of these sand-swept provinces, the outsiders have felt free to deny that the oases exist. Mr. Harold Nicolson now comes forward, with his delicately sane and ironic analysis, and justifies both convictions. Swinburne was an enchanting musician, and yet his performance could be as tiresome as that of a cow wailing for her lost calf.

In the process of winnowing the wheat from the chaff, Mr. Nicolson gives reasons for several innovations. He offers *The Queen Mother* a prominence it has never held before; he defends, examines, and explains *Atalanta in Calydon* with unprecedented fullness; and he gives great importance to the second *Poems and Ballads*. On the other hand, he ridicules the vast and cumbersome drama of *Bothwell*, differentiates sharply between the good and the bad in *Songs before Sunrise*, and, what will be found most surprising, relegates *Poems and Ballads: First Series*, on which the faith of the elders has been most passionately founded, to a relatively low position among its author's works. He thinks little of

Chastelard and less of 'Tristram of Lyonesse,' while recognizing in them elements of permanent value. But in the 1866 volume he finds little that he thinks will retain respect, and this is perhaps the most questionable feature of his criticism. That I should have lived to hear an admirer of Swinburne declare 'Dolores' and 'Hesperia' and 'Erotion' to be entirely devoid of 'durable interest'! These are indeed the whirligigs of fashion, but the worst whirligig of all is that I have to confess myself partly converted to Mr. Nicolson's opinion. Perhaps, however, in his revolt against these experiments, he hardly appreciates the technical beauty of the best of them, the way in which metre and verbiage and illustration are concentrated in a perfection of stimulus, as though a soda-water siphon should inconceivably spout flaming brandy. I think that Mr. Nicolson will revise the opinion that 'Dolores' is nothing but 'sadistic jingle,' but on the whole I am not prepared to defend very fiercely the poems we used to think so impassioned.

I should give a false idea of Mr. Nicolson's book if I represented it as destructive to the poet's reputation. On the contrary, its main feature of novelty is the firmness with which it divides the good from the bad, vigorously sweeping out of the field what is immaterial and self-imitative, concentrating attention on what is really important. To Mr. Nicolson, as much as to the early infatuated admirers, Swinburne is a man of letters of the highest importance, one of the great English poets of established and perennial fame. What, however, he aims at doing, and does with the exercise of an almost frigid irony, is to limit our approval to what is really first-rate, and to acknowledge with unprecedented candor that a great deal of what Swinburne published is third-rate or of no rate at all.

Some New Letters and Writings of Lafcadio Hearn, edited by Sanki Ichikawa. Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1926. 3½ yen.

[Edmund Blunden in the *Japan Advertiser*]

In the latest volume — if one is safe in calling any volume on Hearn 'the latest' — Professor Sanki Ichikawa, the philologist of Tokyo Imperial University, supplements the collection of *Japanese Letters* made by Miss Elizabeth Bisland (Mrs. Wetwors) and published in 1910. That collection includes principally the weightier and