

## Literary Standards

EVERY day for many weeks past the *Chicago Tribune* has crowned its editorial columns with the famous words, "My Country, Right or Wrong." As compared with Chesterton's analogue, "My Mother, Drunk or Sober," there are points in favor of the *Tribune* motto. The mood it exhibits, however, is too typical not to be reckoned with. It is the mood which, in affairs that involve loyalty, violently resents discriminations. The critical man assumes to pass judgment, to exercise his will in the light of his sense of the fitness of things. Is this personal adherence to one's own honest feeling and honest thinking to be repudiated as a kind of treachery to the tribe? Is the thing to say: "Yes, in all small matters of taste, let us nuzzle about right and wrong, but not in matters of deep moment. In the teeth of opposition let us forswear such scrupulosities. Let us reach for the sword—or the tailor's needle—or the bung-hammer—of our Fathers"?

Well, if patriotism, in order to satisfy jingo blatancy, must be ready to uphold wrong as well as right, the same attitude is luckily not necessary in literature. In literature it is possible to be at once ardently national and definitely critical, to value and urge every varied proclamation of our spirit, and at the same time to care passionately for the beauty and the veracity of that proclamation. The ties of the nation are real ties, and disapproval does not dissolve them, but it is as idle for an American to guarantee allegiance to his nation's literature as it would be for a parent to pledge unswerving devotion to his child. The sanction of one's spirit is not a thing that can be pledged.

In the degree that criticism and appreciation have an influence on creative art, their temper is of serious importance. It is not that a few aesthetes can "sanction" from on high. A cult is not a culture. But, just as influential individual opinions sway a jury or turn an election, so contagious criticism makes or hampers a literature. It is on that account that the most important literary problem in America is to establish a national standpoint in criticism.

To maintain for American literature an atmosphere that is intelligent as well as warm is the real function of our criticism. As to the necessity for warm appreciations, it is simple enough, no doubt, for the eclectic reader to disparage American accomplishment, and to point out, without scrutinizing the causes, the superiority of contemporary English and Continental achievement. But there can be no question whatever that such disparagement is not penetrating. The retort to it is not solely that America is a young country. Few countries are so young that they are not old enough to know better. The fairer and wiser retort is the one that gives true value to the preoccupations, the obligations, the disadvantages that unavoidably affect us.

"Society, in these States, is cankered, crude, superstitious and rotten." "Our democracy is, so far, an almost complete failure," except "in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly deceptive superficial popular intellectuality." Such was the severe judgment of a great American in 1870, but this sort of indictment

however exciting to the palate, is innutritious food for the brain. If our preoccupations are still commercial and our popular intellectuality still superficial, scolding alone will not cure them. The truth is, America is still at the beginning of her literature. The pioneer days are over, but the pioneer attitude remains. Great as our country is, it is ordered neither for writers nor for readers, and with all our business enterprise we are deficient in the very machinery of culture. It is not because Americans are deficient in taste that they favor popular inferiorities, but rather because there is as yet no tradition of a literature richly native. If the worst fresh trash in magazines is preferred to the best fresh expression in books it is largely because books, from the start, are divorced from direct experience. Pedagogues are not necessarily subhuman, but no one can deny that the country has not yet risen above its enslavement to classic English literature. On the salt meat of academicism the American child, whose vivid associations are all local, is nourished. A distaste for good literature, a conviction that it is divorced from life, is a necessary consequence. For this reason, if for no other, there is a constant need to vindicate literature as well as create it, and it will need years of sympathetic understanding before the relation between national literature and its teachers is adjusted. A fairer day in court for American writers, as such, must be part of this revision of standards.

But if the critic must take much American literary effort as he takes the street paving in Chicago, astonished less at the beginning of the prairie than at the extension of the asphalt, he must also remember the value and the duty of intolerance. If literature is to serve as index to life, to indicate a greater liberation and a higher discipline of the spirit, it cannot thrive on mere leniency. One can be a true lover of birds without pining to propagate sparrows.

Complete tolerance, as everyone knows, is incompatible with proportioned growth. If persuasion is ineffectual, the option is militancy or abdication; and this is just as true in the sphere of ideas themselves as in the sphere where they are applied. From one standpoint it was intolerant to object to slavery, but it was a noble intolerance, and if similar intolerance in criticism is not indulged and encouraged and supported, our literature in this country will choke to death with weeds. It may be permissible for the genial American to have his literary "favorite son." There is no law against such private weaknesses. But when it comes to public advocacy or public assertion, the more criticism resolute is the better.

"The process of reading is not a half sleep, but, in the highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle." A civilization in which thinking is not athletic, and feeling not intense, is a civilization without the fire of life. Nationalism in literature, therefore, requires that the infant industry be protected, but not at the expense of its vitality. We must conspire for our Mark Twains, our Stephen Cranes, our O. Henrys, our Finley Dunnes, our Sarah Orne Jewetts, our George Ades. But to vindicate these real interpreters is not our sole concern. Against our false interpreters and their subservient publics, we must, if we are to have a true literature in America, stand

## James Stephens

*Songs from the Clay*, by James Stephens. New York: The Macmillan Co. \$1.00.

THIS is Mr. Stephens's third book of verse, and it cannot be said to belie the volumes that preceded it. In this, as in his other books, Mr. Stephens writes simple and sincere and lovely verse, and to suggest that he lacks poetic instinct would be absurd, but with "*Songs from the Clay*" it becomes more clear than ever that in poetry Mr. Stephens is not completely or freely himself.

And yet, of all the young Irishmen who have begun to write since William Butler Yeats and George Russell and John Synge authorized literary expression in contemporary Ireland, Mr. Stephens is easily the most distinguished. If he has failed in his verse to draw fully on the brimming reservoir within him, it is not because he is imaginatively dry. It is merely because in another and original medium he speaks with deeper confidence. If he is, so far, limited in poetry, as he is limited in his studies of familiar society, there is another principality in which he instinctively rules.

In "*The Crock of Gold*" and "*The Demi-Gods*" Mr. Stephens is like a youngster released from admiring elders in the drawing-room and joined with his fellow-imps out of doors. Here he is a liberated soul, fully immersed in his sense of the wonder, the humor, the gaiety, the spiritual portent of life. In these two books he reveals what interests him most, his own sense of what life is and should be. Born into a world that hampers his imagination, placing on him hard necessity to occupy himself with trite and tiresome facts, he has created a world all his own in which all the realities are poignant and all the facts relevant and exciting. In this world of gods and tinkers, spiders and donkeys and philosophers and children, Mr. Stephens is supremely himself. Here he gambols and revels without a shadow of stiffness, and he offers us irresistible invitation to believe with him that it is as real as any world ever can be; that it is a real world, because it is one in which a heart is at home.

It is not without experiment that Mr. Stephens discovered this means of writing his imaginative history. In his first verse, "*Insurrections*," and his first prose, "*Mary, Mary*," he sought in accustomed mediums an excuse for his soul. But it is easy to see why these mediums failed him. What inspired him to write his first poetry was not authentic feeling. He was simulating the high emotions of other poets, Blake and Browning and Poe. "*Insurrections*" was imaginative reflex action. In "*The Hill of Vision*" he was himself, but though he found voice there for his love of life, his love of freedom, his sympathy for all sentient creatures, his delight in great spaces and "happy clouds," he never availed himself naturally in these verses of the sympathies that most exalt him. In his latest book he seems conscious of this penury. "I veer and break and yaw on my little pipe of straw." But he does not realize that it is not to his pipe that he makes his readers dance.

For tenderness of feeling "*Mary, Mary*" is one of the fairest exercises in Irish fiction. It is not only the charwoman who is finely supposed, and Mary herself, but the elephantine policeman as well. As human drama, however, its fluid is thinner than blood. It is not corporeal.

But as soon as Mr. Stephens indulged his fantasy to the full, he found that unity which is the aspiration of all

made average people available to the imagination. But since Ireland has never conquered its social comedy in poetry or prose, it became necessary for Mr. Stephens to create an Ireland of his own. This, in "*The Crock of Gold*" and "*The Demi-Gods*," is his achievement. To relate all his intuitions about life, all his passion and surmise and faith, to common-sense Ireland was just as much beyond him as it would be beyond a child. It involved an apprenticeship to ordinary circumstance which in reality he shunned. But as soon as he transported himself outside society, among leprecauns and goats and jackdaws, among the gods of desire and the gods of divine imagination, he could confess his inmost soul.

From the first page of "*The Crock of Gold*" to the last, we are conscious of the gift of the seer. The wisdom of "*The Crock of Gold*," however, is not the wisdom of intellect. It is the warming wisdom of sympathy. "And what would you call wisdom?" asks the practical wayside woman of the pilgrim philosopher.

"I couldn't rightly say now," that adventurer replies, "but I think it was not to mind about the world, and not to care whether you were hungry or not, and not to live in the world at all but only in your own head, for the world is a tyrannous place. You have to raise yourself above things instead of letting things raise themselves above you. We must not be slaves to each other, and we must not be slaves to our necessities either. That is the problem of existence . . . and mind you this, mankind has declared war against Nature and we will win . . ." "It's good talk," said the woman, "but it's foolishness . . . You have to live in the world, my dear, whether you like it or not, and, believe me now, that there isn't any wisdom but to keep clear of the hunger, for if that gets near enough it will make a hare of you. Sure, listen to reason now like a good man."

It is not till the philosopher left Angus Og, however, that his heart was merrily alive. Then "he tossed his voice on every wind that went by. From the wells of forgetfulness he regained the shining words and gay melodies which his childhood had delighted in, and these he sang loudly and unceasingly as he marched." "I have learned," said the Philosopher, "that the head does not hear anything until the heart has listened, and that what the heart knows to-day the head will understand to-morrow."

But the pantheist's pilgrim's progress is not undisturbed. When Pan comes to young Caitlin she "could feel but not know, her eyes looked forward but did not see, her hands groped in the sunlight but felt nothing. It was like the edge of a little wind which stirred her tresses but could not lift them, or the first white peep of the dawn which is neither light nor darkness." After she knows Pan, "after the quiet weariness of ignorance," the unquiet weariness of thought fell upon her. But then she too meets Angus Og. From him she learns "the greatest thing in the world," the merging of thought and emotion.

Though the delight of "*The Crock of Gold*" is its philosophy, it may as well be confessed that at times its pithiness is almost indigestible. Charming as it is, whimsical and fertile and suggestive, it errs in being incessant. It is all very well for Thomas Edison to say that human beings require almost no sleep. It is the natural sentiment of a man who sells artificial light. But the faculty of attention is limited and Mr. Stephens puts a strain on it. All the