

Books and Things

DICK, in *A Hind Let Loose*, is telling Fay what the beginning of a climb is like in the Valais:

"Next thing you look up with a start; the front man has put out the lantern, but ever so far off, over the Rhone, there's a grave, russet light being held to the face of sleeping provinces."

"'Held to the face of sleeping provinces.' H'm," said Fay, "it scans. All right otherwise. I say, though, provinces? What about cantons?"

"Cantons? Hang it, no. That murders it. Provinces." It was the first time that Dick had ever stood up for a wording of his own, not to say one he did not know the case for. To his amazement, Fay saw—in fact, had only feared lest Dick had preferred the good tune to the bad by an accident.

"It scans. All right otherwise." Dickens must have been the prose writer in whom, when I was fifteen or sixteen, I first noticed lines that scanned as blank verse. Instinctively I resented their presence, without knowing why or stopping to ask, without at that time knowing or caring whether the authorities were on my side. They happened to be on my side, most of them, as I discovered a few years later, when I found Professor Saintsbury disapproving the iambic habit in Ruskin, and reprinting bits of him in the form of verse. Another authority for my distaste was Pater, who accused Dryden's prose of being "vitiating by many a scanning line," and whose remark that "you can't scan Wordsworth's prose" was obviously to be scored as praise. Youthful dogmatism easily lived through the slightly later discovery that Wordsworth himself did not altogether agree with Pater. "The only antithesis to Prose is Metre," says the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, "nor is this, in truth, a *strict* antithesis, because lines and passages of metre so naturally occur in writing prose, that it would be scarcely possible to avoid them, even were it desirable."

Youthful dogmatism, I have written, but the adjective is only a way of speaking, for I have remained equally dogmatic to this day, and quite as unable to give reasons for my resentment. Not by discourse may I hope to instil conviction into anybody who doesn't dislike blank verse in the midst of prose, but only by giving examples. Such as: "Were I to write this in pentameters you'd surely think I wasn't serious. You'd say my queer proclivity to verse proclaimed the sedentary mountebank, or else betrayed the author's lack of skill to implicate the other harmony (as Dryden says) of prose; more difficult than iamb after iamb without end." Everybody's ear resents this sort of thing. True: but how shall I answer a reader who says he should dislike my blank verse quite as heartily if I had offered it to him as part of a poem? I don't know.

In fact I am not at all certain that he wouldn't have disliked it more, as another example may show: "One of the men I knew rather well at Cambridge, and used to see a good deal of, happened to have the room which had once been Milton's. O temperate bard! Be it confest that, for the first time, seated within thy innocent lodge and oratory, one of a festive circle, I poured out libations to thy memory, drank, till pride and gratitude grew dizzy in a brain never excited by the fumes of wine before that hour, or since." The part which is Wordsworth's here is probably too familiar to serve my purpose exactly, but I dare say many readers who didn't happen to spot The

Prelude might read almost to the end of the quoted words without detecting the blank verse. For such readers, if they will go over it again, as verse, won't Wordsworth's metrical confession of drunkenness have even greater comic force than when they thought he was talking prose?

I am trying, you perceive, to put a little difficulty into a question which I have always regarded as easier than it really is to answer. As thus: "Henry's own army was by this time scarcely more than ten thousand strong, and he soon learnt that a mighty French host of fifty thousand men blocked the way at Agincourt. In the early morning mass was said in the English army, and Henry's scanty followers prayed earnestly that their king's right, as they believed it to be, might be shown on that day. Henry's own prayers were long and fervid: 'O God of battles! steel my soldiers' hearts; possess them not with fear; take from them now the sense of reckoning, if the opposed numbers pluck their hearts from them. Not today, O Lord! O! not today, think not upon the fault my father made in compassing the crown. I Richard's body have interred anew, and on it have bestow'd more contrite tears than from it issu'd forced drops of blood. Five hundred poor have I in yearly pay, who twice a day their wither'd hands hold up toward heaven, to pardon blood; and I have built two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests still sing for Richard's soul.'"

From behind the scenes, where I put Shakespeare and Samuel Rawson Gardiner together, I of course cannot tell how the result sounds from the front of the house. All I can do is to guess that although the transition from prose to verse is a jolt, the verse itself is so magnificent that this jolt is almost immediately forgotten, that a moment later the fact is forgotten that one has been reading prose, that the only displeasure remaining with a reader is directed against me, for being ass enough to print as prose—and thus to set going between eye and ear a contest teasingly wasteful of attention—some of the finest iambics in the world. But would the effect be quite the same if the Shakespeare had been only two or three lines long?

What set me adrift on this sea was a book I have just been reading, *Nine of Hearts*, by Ethel Colburn Mayne (Harcourt, Brace & Company). It is miles and miles above the ordinary book of short stories, but I bitterly resent Miss Mayne's habit of dropping into iambics. One blank verse line sets me to watching for the next; two together make me uneasily expectant of more than two; seven is a number which having noticed I keep in mind, wondering whether it is a record she will or won't beat. She does beat seven in *Interlude for Death*, a profound and beautiful story, where, on page 101, I find eight blank verses in a row.

To explain one's dislike of iambics in prose by saying that in a prose context they defeat the particular expectation which that contest had brought about, is not to carry explanation very far. Nevertheless, expectation does make a difference. Take the question from Mr. Montague with which I started. I agree with Colum Fay in thinking that "held to the face of sleeping provinces" is the good tune, and "held to the face of sleeping cantons" the bad one. But my preference is for this occasion only, and must be due, I suppose, to something I can't put my finger on in the cadence of the words preceding. For "being held to the face of sleeping cantons" may be a very good tune indeed when sung by Catullus or Swinburne, or in our own day by Ridgely Torrence. P. L.

"It Was Proposed"

Damaged Souls, by Gamaliel Bradford. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company. \$3.00.

IT is an open question whether books written to a program must not always have the weakness of their type. Mr. Gamaliel Bradford confesses, as the *raison d'être* of *Damaged Souls* that "it was proposed" that he should write a series for Harper's Magazine. "Our idea would be to go through our national history, and select prominent figures who have loomed over-large in their own day . . . Of course, in dealing with such a gallery we should expect you to proceed ruthlessly and with scant deference to tradition." Mr. Bradford replied that the invitation made a "fascinating appeal to the worst elements" of his nature, but that, after all, he was not quite an iconoclast and did not want to overthrow or destroy even the things that deserve such a fate. Yet instead of refusing forthwith he made a counter-proposal "to deal with a group of somewhat discredited figures, though not to deal ruthlessly with them," and suggested that instead of "iconoclastic portraits," which put the burden of iconoclasm on him, the series be called "damaged or patched souls," which put the responsibility for the damage either on fate or on the gentlemen themselves.

It would be interesting to have Mr. Bradford turn his critical eye on himself in a consecutive statement. The essay might properly be printed as an addendum to *American Portraits*, instead of occurring hither and yon throughout his pages as it does now. For Mr. Bradford is to a high degree self-conscious. In general he regards himself as a rather startling liberal,—“Oh, what fun it is to be a rebel!”—though he is only a follower in the ranks, and even at that an intermittent one: “Some of us occasionally like to think new thoughts and step out of the beaten track, and we like one who makes us do these things.” He likes also to be mildly shocked at divagations from the open road, which he is willing to witness but not to record: “I wish I could embellish these decorous pages with the gay adventures of the fair Madame D. in the crowded inn at Rotterdam.” His scruples are less fine than those of Mr. Howells at the “Elizabethan breadth of parlance” in Mark Twain's letters, which he could not bear to burn though he could not bear to look at them again, for Mr. Bradford acknowledges a covert pleasure in reminiscences which he has not the courage to share. And all the while his self-consciousness is blighted with the false modesty which can lead him to call himself “an insignificant, impertinent, treacherous biographer.” These few casually selected but quite typical confessions lead to an evaluation of Mr. Bradford as a biographer. In his lack of the “simplicity and almost child-like candor” which he attributes to all his *Damaged Souls* except John Randolph, he raises a question as to the pertinence and significance of his portraits; and he challenges inquiry, too, as to his knowledge of life, his opinions about it, and the clarity of his mental processes.

When he exclaims, “Oh, what fun it is to be a rebel!” he implies that he has had some experience at this diversion; but as he goes on to characterize a rebel in the abstract he shows that he has never been one or intimately known one. It is a straw man he sets up. His rebel is the mischief-maker of history. Rebellion is a huge practical joke. It is boisterous, destructive, humorless jollity, and the rebel is the thick-skinned convention-smasher who

can go his way “untroubled by the criticism and abuse of spite and malice, indeed rather stimulated by them.” This is a fancy picture which has almost no relation to actual rebels. The iconoclasts one knows have been moved to utterance and action by conditions they could not endure. They have soberly undertaken to set them right. Sensitive as Shylock at the expression of public scorn, they have been goaded to extravagance by criticism and abuse, and have suffered the tortures which come with being damned. Mr. Bradford says that Satan and Prometheus are “the great ideal rebels.” Yet even they, as I recall them, do not seem to have reveled in the cheery irresponsibility which he ascribes to all their kind. Mr. Bradford was thinking of cynics, sceptics, journalistic radicals. He was writing with Tom Paine in mind, but he used a term which should apply equally to Paine and Washington and John Brown. When he wrote “Oh, what fun it is to be a rebel!” he actually meant, “Oh, what fun it is to write biographical sketches for the readers of Harper's Magazine!” A defensible proposition based on experience.

When Mr. Bradford declares further that “some of us occasionally like to think new thoughts and step out of the beaten track,” he suggests again that he is speaking out of his experience. But a careful reading forces the conviction that he is writing tolerantly from observation. There is no trace of new thought—in the sense of original or even independent thought—about family or school or market or church or state in all his pages. The canons of a Victorian America are finalities for him. He quotes Aaron Burr and requotes him: “On full investigation it will be discovered that there is scarcely a departure from order but leads to or is indissolubly connected with a departure from morality.” This harmonizes happily with his statement, apropos of Randolph of Roanoke, that it “is the essence of conservatism to hate change, to love quiet, to seek repose.” Of “our Constitution” he declares that the most important element is “the original principle of state vitality.” It is a broad thesis. Does he really think so, or is he merely saying one of the things echoed by those who hate change, even of their habitual platitudes? One suspects the latter.

The basic challenge to Mr. Bradford's work is as to his lack of method. He alludes to himself as an “impertinent biographer.” One is ready enough to decry this self-accusation, but equally ready to indict him for frequent unpertinence. He is loose and inconsecutive, so assured that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds that he is not haunted by it even throughout the course of a single chapter. Of course he does not write a study of several thousand words at a single sitting, but coming to it in changing moods he writes with a zest that again and again carries him quite away from what he seems to believe is his main thesis.

The sketch of Paine is an example. Paine is a rebel, and a rebel delights in destruction. Yet, he says, Paine preached nationality, coordination, cooperation, federal control. He espoused many of the reforms “which are now so accepted that we cannot imagine the world without them.” This does not seem to be very destructive, so Mr. Bradford returns to his charge. He was disrespectful to George Washington,—and to God. Yet “he affirmed and reaffirmed, with obvious honesty, his belief in God, and his abiding and comforting hope of a future life;” and “no one can question Paine's sincere interest to inspire in his fellow-men a spirit of trust, confidence,