

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

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Dirt

SINS have their ups and downs, like the cost of living. Each generation has its pet aversion and saves for that the word immorality. Immorality in the eighteenth century was irreligion, about 1800 in New England it was democracy which was supposed to carry atheism with it, all through the later nineteenth century it meant sexual irregularity, now it is often reserved for drunkenness. And while one sin gets all the publicity, the others flourish in the shade. While English literature was playing up the calamities that result from illicit love, alcoholism was tightening its grip upon Europe and a greedy materialism was building the foundations of the temple of war. The sin which wrecked Tennyson's ideal kingdom was adultery, and statesmen could commit any crime but the theft of other men's wives.

And now, when the one issue upon which it is possible to stir up moral excitement is prohibition, a vast change has come over our attitude toward sexual aberrations, with little attention except from fanatics who rage whenever a spade is called a spade.

To get rid of the inhibitions of the Victorian period where the writer was not allowed so much as to mention things that everyone knew, is a great gain for honest readers and an immeasurable relief for honest authors. But this by no means tells the whole story. In poetry, in the novel, on the stage most of all, the suggestive situation, the risqué line, cynical laughter at restraint, leering praise of the grosser instincts, have an astonishing place in popular favor. They get the laugh, they sell books, plays built upon them succeed, novels compounded of them are sure of discussion. A hardened writer for the public can scarcely hesitate as to what to put in his story if he seeks easy success.

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Every newsstand is dripping with magazines the entire purpose of which is to suggest, to arouse, to gratify eroticism under the thinnest veil of a language from which certain words are excluded (by legal advice) and by plots which always turn aside before the obvious conclusion. The joint circulation of such magazines is sufficient to put a copy into the hands of one out of every five or ten readers in the United States, yet the sour guardians of the public morals, who spring upon every serious attempt to show life as it is, ignore the million circulation and attack only the poor intellectual's play or the literary efforts of an erotic who is nevertheless a genius.

The age by comparison with earlier generations is sex mad (without being necessarily more licentious in deed); a fact at least as worthy of consideration as alcohol percentages or a belief or disbelief in evolution.

This is no argument for censorship. Censorship which goes beyond a law forbidding pornography has always been administered with stupidity and injustice. The suggestive scene will be passed, the honest one censored; poison for the millions will go unnoticed, while art that widens its scope to make passion beautiful or sex tragic will be punished because it is art and makes a ringing example.

This is no argument for indiscriminate suppression. These broad swinging movements of the instinct are seasonal and periodic; they come inevitably and they cure inevitably as the race finds its balance. Not all the puritans of all the ages could check the morbid interest in sex which just now absorbs us, for in part it is a war neurosis, in part it is relief from

"So This Was All"

By SARA TEASDALE

SO this was all there was to the great play
She came so far to act in, this was all—
Except the short last act, and the slow fall
Of the final curtain, that might catch half-way
As final curtains do, and leave the grey
Lorn end of things too long exposed. The hall
Clapped faintly, and she took her curtain call
Knowing how little she had left to say.
And in the pause before the last act started,
Slowly unpinning the roses she had worn,
She reconsidered lines that had been said,
And found them hardly worthy the high-hearted
Ardor that she had brought, nor the bright, torn
Roses that shattered round her, dripping red.

This Week



Three Books on Jefferson. Reviewed
by *Albert J. Nock*.

Edgar Allan Poe Letters. Reviewed
by *Norman Foerster*.

"The Chinese Theatre," Reviewed
by *Glenn Hughes*.

"Microbe Hunters." Reviewed by
Hans Zinsser.

"Pig Iron." Reviewed by *Joseph
Wood Krutch*.

"The Black Flemings." A Review.

"Lady Mary Wortley Montagu." Reviewed by *Wilmarth Lewis*.

"The Diary of a Young Lady of Fashion." Reviewed by *Edward Davison*.

The Bowling Green. By *Christopher Morley*.

Next Week, or Later

Conrad's Skill as an Artist. By *Mrs. Conrad*.

Sir Harry Johnston's "Relations." Reviewed by *Stanley Went*.

D. H. Lawrence. By *Richard Aldington*.

undue suppressions, in part it is a response to an obscure psychologic change which has shaken youth free from age and negated the sanctions of tradition and experience, in part it is the result of the decay of formal religion and its controls.

Two forces are in conflict and the clear ground between the is not yet broad enough to stand on, a situation which American fiction beautifully illustrates. On one side is the old saccharine sentiment

(Continued on page 608)

English Criticism

By FRANK SWINNERTON

"I SEE be th' pa-apers," as Mr. Dooley used to say, that a body of persons known as "English critics" is said to be supercilious in its attitude to American literature. As I am not prepared to admit that there are any English critics, and as I have never noticed that superciliousness was an attribute of the generality of English people, I am driven to believe that "th' pa-apers" are misinformed. Criticism is not cultivated as an art in England, for the reason that nobody wishes to read criticism. Accordingly, critics die young; or they become reviewers, and perish miserably by rapid enfeeblement of all faculties. And if they become reviewers they have no time to criticize. The reviewer in all countries known to me is too busy writing about books to read them attentively; and it is my firm belief that unless one has read a book attentively one cannot offer any observations upon it which can be described truthfully as criticism. Nevertheless, when "th' pa-apers" speak of "English critics" they probably mean "English reviewers."

Now reviewing in England resembles reviewing in America in this respect—that one cannot lump it all together and say in a single word that it is definitely one thing or another. Certainly the prevailing note of English reviewing, by and large, is not its superciliousness. On the contrary. While it may be less generous than American reviewing, which, if it praises, praises very highly indeed, English reviewing upon the whole is marked by a very fair degree of honesty and respect for sincere writing. It is even much too lenient towards mediocre work in conventional styles; and it is sparing of praise for work of a rather higher order; but practically no book published in England goes without some praise from some quarter. (For proof, see any publisher's advertisements.) It is a pretty general rule that English reviewers are genial to hopeless work. They are merciful to the unknown and to the commercially unsuccessful. They do not condemn unless they are sure that the author can afford to receive condemnation. Upon the successful they feel free to open all their batteries. I can recall an occasion upon which an American woman referred to me in conversation as a "rising young novelist!" I impudently corrected her: "Oh, risen, risen." "No," said a cynic in the company, who had suffered, "you're still praised in the press. You can't be regarded as 'risen' until you've been slated by every paper in England."

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Unfortunately if an Englishman sees an adverse review of an English book in an American paper (say a characteristic exhibition by Mr. H. L. Mencken), or if an American sees an adverse review of an American book in an English paper, there may arise a suspicion that national prejudice has entered unfavorably into the estimate. This suspicion seems to me to be groundless. I think all reviewers should guard against such misconception; but as a reviewer of nearly twenty years' experience I fancy that candor is the best policy and is never lastingly resented. I regard myself as a typical Englishman (being partly Scots), and I am neither supercilious (I appeal to Americans in confirmation) nor—as a novelist—hypersensitive in the matter of criticism. I may therefore perhaps be allowed to say that I think a few American writers are much more suspicious of English reviewers than they need be. The English reviewer is not taken too seriously at home. Why should he be taken too

seriously elsewhere? Why should it be assumed, as I find it is often assumed in America, that the Englishman, like Pooh Bah, is "born sneering"? As an instance of this suspiciousness, let me recall that when I was in America two years ago a young interviewer in a Southern State opened fire with the question, "What do you consider the chief faults of the American novelists?" Rather taken aback, I said, "It isn't faults so much as qualities that impress me." His unanswerable reply was, "Ah, that's English evasiveness."

But it is time to discriminate between the different sorts of reviewer. I have already said that there are no critics in England. There are no critical writers, that is, who are so clearly above party and above prejudice as to command general respect. An anonymous front-page article in *The Times Literary Supplement* (and these articles vary greatly in quality, and no doubt in influence) will do more to draw attention to any book than any other printed commendation known to me; and this perhaps illustrates rather the prestige of the paper and the mysterious power of anonymity than the authoritative-ness of the critic. Indeed, there is no scope in England for critics, who would find it difficult to obtain publicity for their views. But for reviewers there is still plenty of scope, especially for those who have the news sense and who will give to their reviews the appearance of topicality.

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The worst of all reviewers are the amateurs. It is so in all countries. These are very often elderly clergymen or elderly ladies who write incessantly to publishers for copies of new books, and who succeed in decorating some odd corner of a wretched village sheet with a poorly-written, foolish, ill-set laudation of every book that comes by fatal chance into their clutches. They are the Cassios of the reviewing trade, who exclaim, "Why, this is a more excellent song than the other!" about each book they read. Banal the reviews written by such men and women may be; but to suppose them for a single instant to be supercilious would be absurd. They are pathetic.

The best of all reviewers are the men and women (one knows them as a rule only by their initials) to whom taste is the guiding principle. They are not strictly professional reviewers (those who review books by the bundle), and they are not people with an elaborate apparatus of æsthetic standards. They are not bent upon display, nor upon telling the whole truth. They have no concern with—and even, it sometimes appears, no awareness of—the literary fashion of the day. If a book seems to them to be good or bad in its own sort, whatever that sort may be, they praise it or blame it accordingly. They read a book—every book—sympathetically, upon its own merits, pass judgment with hesitation and discretion, and remain obscure. If I were a literary editor I would hunt out these reviewers, and make them the nucleus of a really disinterested band. The reviews they write may often be mild, or wrong; but they are sincere, and they show taste. All those who have seen many reviews (and I have spent two-thirds of my life in publishers' offices) realize how little taste there is in the average review, and how important a matter taste is in the judgment of works of art or imagination. There are a few only moderately successful creative writers, also, who criticize with understanding. Their comparative non-success in the popular market has been due, not to lack of talent, but to preoccupation with themes or temperamental vagaries which interest only the refined few. This bent, in itself, makes such authors men of sympathy and men of taste. It prevents them from feeling envy (since their love is for truth and beauty and not for lucre); it keeps fresh their fine faculty of expectation. I cannot say that these writers have authority, because their work is inconspicuous. But they have understanding; and this is a quality which many reviewers lack, as they lack taste, because the ordinary reviewer is handicapped by one terrible penalty of his calling. He reads books for the purpose of passing judgment upon them, and not for pleasure's sake or for the purpose of acquiring knowledge from them. If he begins with taste, his taste is quickly lost in indigestion.

I have indicated the type of reviewer that I consider the best. I must return to the types which I think inferior. Less pathetic than the amateurs, but equally banal, are those who contribute "day of publication" notices to a few of the more remote provincial dailies. Some publishers used to be glad

of very early enthusiastic reviews which they could quote in their advertisements; and although few publishers now count upon these rather blown-upon early notices the supply continues indefatigably. Such reviews exist only for purposes of quotation. They have no other value. They are glib, inaccurate, and ridiculous. Everything they describe is fascinating from cover to cover; everything furnishes forth an entrancing entertainment; everything is filled full and brimming over with all the splendors that only cliché can express. There is no superciliousness here. There is mechanical enthusiasm, which defeats its own object, because

When everybody's somebody
Then no one's anybody.

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We come now to the legitimate professional provincial reviewers. These may be divided into the young and the middle-aged. The young are severe; the middle-aged are kind. The young are severe because it is the nature of the young to be severe. They are graduates from provincial universities, or they are enthusiasts for good literature whose palate is still immature and whose egotism is unbroken. They mingle unexpected enthusiasms with fierce contempts (and the change from the former to the latter is a matter of weeks only). But they are not supercilious. No warrior has time to be supercilious; and the younger among them are all warriors. The older reviewers are not warriors. They are chary of giving blame. If they cannot praise they are apt to shirk all comment. As they grow older a sense appears to come to them that newer generations, newer tastes, have left their own preferences behind. They praise or condemn gently. Their attitude is: "What right have I to call this book rubbish? Or to call it unwholesome? The fault may be mine. The book may be the work of a coming genius. It may be the work of one struggling with poverty." But they are not supercilious. Believe me, no reviewer who has lost confidence in his power to appraise at a glance is likely to be supercilious.

Finally there are the reviewers for the London papers, who may again be sub-divided into several groups. The reviews in the London papers are generally better written than those which appear in the provincial press (of course, with such notable exceptions as those written for *The Manchester Guardian*, *The Birmingham Post*, and one or two more). These are written by young or slightly older men and women of some education and occasionally of some wit. Some of the writers are intellectuals (that is, men and women whose intensive education has narrowed their sympathies and aroused a perverted aristocratic sense). Some of them are rather broader in sympathy, but still a little elated by a consciousness of educational superiority to their fellows (e. g., the comment made to me recently in good faith by a young man upon a bad book which we both condemned, "One feels that he hasn't had a classical education. . ."). I must suppose that it is against the writers of such reviews that the American charge of superciliousness (particularly towards American books) is brought; and I hope to show that the charge is a false one.

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The defects of English newspaper criticism as it is written in London at the present time are lack of taste, over-confidence, and the evil, but limited, power of the clique. These defects are due to the fact that in England literature is not—commercially—a very profitable affair. Young men with real critical acumen cannot give themselves up to the critical profession, because they cannot afford to do so. Therefore the reviewing of books falls much into the hands of civil servants with leisure and an inclination for literature, into the hands of those who have independent means, into the hands of feverish hacks, and into the hands of those who form literary caucuses.

It is extremely difficult for a young writer who is not a popular novelist to make a living by means of journalism; and as there are numerous writers whose talent lies elsewhere than in the telling of tales, it is clear that such writers cannot easily live by the produce of their pens. A common interest in literature brings them together. They meet and discuss books and authors. They admire or they dislike each other. Parties are formed, and then cliques; and in the end one of these cliques is enabled for a time to pass off the works of its members upon an ingenuous and torpid public by means of multiple

reviewing. Jones will review Smith's book in four or five different papers; and Smith will do the same by Jones's book when it is published. Robinson will help both, and will receive help in turn. Brown will lend a hand. Possibly a dozen favorable reviews of one book will result. Each reviewer receives payment for his reviews, and each will receive commendation in turn when his own book appears. Now this is a very friendly arrangement, and it has certain obvious advantages. It produces an air of unanimity in the press. But it tends to diminish the power of reviews. Commendation in the press now counts for very little. In the same way dispraise has ceased to be condemnation. It is not the tone of the review which counts with the initiated, but the space it occupies. The tone of the review may be anything you like: the length is a rough indication of the reviewed author's standing—at least in the editorial offices of the paper, but as a rule also in popular esteem. The length and the promptness. The one weapon which these community reviewers have is the power to suppress all mention of a book written by somebody they dislike; and this weapon cannot be used very often or very successfully against writers of distinction.

It is sometimes imagined that reviewing by clique is a new thing; but while it has been carried recently to a scandalous pitch it is not new. It is quite old. It is as old as the modern connection between the writing of books and the reviewing of books by the same persons. As long as I have seen anything of the world of newspaper critics (always the London world) it has been spotted by cliques the members of which were suffering from lack of taste, over-confidence, and the instinct to pull wires in favor of each other. As long as reviewing is ill-paid it is bound to attract those who, being young and ambitious, think that they see in reviewing a means of advancing their own reputations. But they can only do this in small groups. They cannot stand alone. They must extravagantly praise their friends, and in return receive extravagant praise. But they do not praise those who are not their friends. If they were to praise those others it would mean that they had shed that sense of inferiority which causes them to hunt in packs.

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For that is really what is at the bottom of community-reviewing. It is the sense that without such venal help you and your friends will never succeed in winning fame and fortune. "Left alone," these young men say, "who would ever notice us? We must gather together, and shout aloud in chorus, and then perhaps we shall be heard and seen." They proceed to shout. Their shouting is to be found in practically all the London daily and weekly periodicals which give space to the reviewing of books. It is not always the same crowd that is shouting, for there are several crowds animated with the same objects; but the shouting is going on all the time. I emphasize this fact in order to show that superciliousness towards American writers does not exist. The only thing that exists is what in England is called the "public school spirit." This is parochialism legitimized and encouraged for the good of the school—the good of the crowd. It takes the form in reviewing of regarding all those who do not belong to your own crowd as being enemies of light. If they belong to other crowds they are enemies; if they belong to no other crowd they are outsiders. There is no superciliousness. There is a sense of superiority which, when it is examined, proves to be a sense of inferiority. When a man feels inferior, he always reminds himself of his superiority; and it is in this way that educated young English reviewers try to justify to themselves the fact that they have not yet personally added masterpieces to the English tongue.

I have said that we have in London several crowds of group reviewers. That is true. But we also have several schools of reviewers who have no necessary connection with any crowd. They may be roughly—but not exhaustively—grouped as the Brilliant School, the Serious School, the Bloomsbury School, and so on. Occasionally all these schools will unite, as they did over Mr. E. M. Forster's novel, "A Passage to India," but as a rule they remain distinct, for reasons which will be made clear. I think it must be said that in addition to these groups there is the Unsuccessful School; and I do not quite know how to make my meaning as regards this school clear without offensiveness. But it is the case that when you have ambition in excess of talent ambition occasionally sours into envy, loss of self-respect, and

(Continued on page 622)