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The Concern of Criticism

DEMOCRACY, at least American democracy with its high average of literacy and its widely disseminated material comforts, has produced a society of a curiously contradictory nature. For the masses that constitute it are at once propulsive and passive. They are at the same time public opinion, and the prey of public opinion. No nation in the world is more equipped by the prevalence of education to form independent judgments; none is more subject to the tyranny of convention. The least reverential of individualists, the American is at the same time the most conforming. He may be adamant to the pretensions of caste, but he is wax to the dictum of the commonalty. He will render up his life for liberty, but he will render up his liberty rather than wear a soft collar if a stiff one be in fashion. His is the nation of fads, of Aimee Semple Macphersons, of catchwords that descend like a plague of locusts on speech from the Atlantic to the Pacific, of the throttle-hold of advertising on the preferences and tastes of the people.

In a country where public opinion is at once so cohesive and so assertive it is especially the function of literature to be critical. For literature, for all that it must reflect reality, sits above the battle, and gets a different perspective upon the conflict from that of its participants. Issues stand out as well as events, and the smoke that clouds the immediate scene is eventually dissipated in the distant prospect.

In our highly mechanized American civilization the nation is as constantly under the bombardment of ideas in times of peace as in times of war, with this difference—that when the combat is on, propaganda is concentrated toward one end and when it is not, it takes a hundred directions. It becomes, then, the critic's primary business—and in this sense the novelist may be critic quite as much as the student of literature—from the welter of activity about him to isolate those manifestations which make for permanent good or ill, and in season and out to wage a lusty fight for or against them. His concern must always be first and foremost with the contemporary scene and with the present day if his writing is to serve as a vitalizing force in life and letters. But it cannot be simply with the surface appearances of society if it is to be more than impressionism, and on the other hand, it must take count of the ephemeral as well as the permanent if it is to be more than academicism.

“The business of intelligent criticism,” said William C. Brownell, perhaps the most intelligent critic America ever produced, “is to be in touch with everything.” The true critic interprets, not dissects, and the value of his criticism is in direct proportion to the penetration of his analysis beneath the shifting impulses and sentiments of the moment. Out of disorder he must bring order; he must so present life that it has pattern, purpose, and if not reason, direction. He must snatch for himself from the apparent contradictions and meaninglessness of existence a philosophy of human action, and he must so interpret it as to persuade his fellows that if society is to endure it must establish certain indestructible ideals and steer its course by their light. He will need all the resources that learning and understanding can offer to inform his writing so that it passes from analysis to synthesis.

It is precisely because there has been so constant a misconception as to the true function of criticism—because it is so currently held that criticism has fulfilled its object when it has performed a dissection—that so much is passed off on the American

The Ruthless Romantic

By GLADYS OAKS

THE realists are not the ruthless ones—
The men who plant potatoes in a field,
Who know what they must sow to have a
yield,
Who use for labor all their shining suns.

But he who strives to plant thoughts in the ground
And grow a rose tree from a crescent moon
Will hardly care if small, dark blood was strewn
Behind his feet after the moon turned round.

... The man who grows potatoes guards her pain
And finds her little glimmers wonderful;
His healing eyes, his hushing hands, are cool,
They smell of berry leaves, the ground, and rain. ...

And how can gentlemen with stars to carry
Upon their necks love women, whom they marry?

This Week



“The Rise of American Civilization.” Reviewed by *Albert Jay Nock*.

“France and America.” Reviewed by *Newton D. Baker*.

“The Mothers.” Reviewed by *C. K. Ogden*.

“Getting Your Money's Worth.” Reviewed by *Rexford Guy Tugwell*.

“Business Without A Buyer.” Reviewed by *Edward S. Cowdrick*.

“Mattock.” Reviewed by *Allan Nevins*.

“The Malletts.” Reviewed by *Grace Frank*.

“Guides, Philosophers and Friends,” and “Eight o'Clock Chapel.” Reviewed by *Ben C. Clough*.

Here's to Crime! By *Charles A. Bennett*.

Chipmunks in the Wall. By *Christopher Morley*.

Next Week, or Later

Sociology à la Carte. By *Franklin H. Giddings*.

public as genuine literature that is spurious. So long as the critic's business, be he novelist or *belle lettrist*, is completed when he has merely photographed appearances or laid bare structure, so long will a literature remain of interest rather than of moment. It is when the critic turns the force of a contemplative mind and a richly stored memory upon his day, and then only, that his day grows to magnitude in the portrayal, and that his literature becomes fecund. Then indeed the critic ceases to be commentator and becomes leader, and criticism becomes an active force in the shaping of opinion and action. Our crying need is for critics of this sort. When we get them, the American inclination to conformity may be translated into discrimination under their onslaughts.

American Poetry

By JAMES RORTY

IN the materials of poetry surely our American Eden offers some of the largest and most luscious apples in the history of the world. Yet since Whitman few have even shaken the tree. And today the disposition of our poets would seem to be to affect a discreet myopia, which, by excluding the temptation of good and evil, leaves them in the innocent possession of the neutral, the minor, the “unpretentious.”

This last I consider the longest and ugliest word which can possibly be hurled at a poet, although I am aware that in all the current reviews it is employed as the suavest of critical amenities—the usual gesture with which a new candidate is received among “Our Best Poets” as listed in the anthologies.

The word is nevertheless a thoroughly invidious and insulting word. If there is one thing which poetry is *not*, it is unpretentious. Poetry is the ego's proud and evaluating claim upon everything that it sees, hears, or touches. It is mercilessly true to the unique vision of a wholly secedent individual. It is therefore necessarily anarchic and challenging in spirit, even though the poet may happen to elect a conventional form.

Each poet brews again the facts and dreams of the world in the crucible of his own temperament, applies the measuring stick of eternity, and casts forth the ingots before the forms are cold. He cannot and should not bother whether the critics or the pedagogues think he is nice or not. Let them mend as best they can the desecrated fabric of civilized expression. He cannot wait. He is too fiercely busy saving his own soul. He is pretentious. That is to say, he is a poet.

But, returning to our American Eden, what are these fruits and why do they go unplucked? They hang high, but since, as I contend, the poet is by definition pretentious, I purpose to regard them with frank covetousness.

Whitman, of course, drew the ground plan of the garden, and even confessed in long catalogues the saurian omnivorousness of his appetites. (Incidentally, if you want a marvellous example of pretentiousness, read the preface to the 1855 edition of “Leaves of Grass”). But after all, Whitman wrote chiefly prospectuses, magnificent though they were. And the Garden has changed since Whitman's time. The enormous fecundity of human discovery and invention in the twentieth century has cluttered it with the most astonishing growths. The jungle of psychoanalysis, full of strange fruits, and lit by lurid heat of lightnings, stretches endlessly into the distance. The towers of our commercial-mechanical civilization aspire more grandly, in a way, than any towers which other ages have built into the blue. A decade ago came the shattering apocalypse of the war; and today the whole world moans in the ensuing peace, as in a trap. Yet our momentum seems irresistible; the huge gears keep grinding; steel is torn from the mountains and flung across the continent in a shining spider-work of rails and high-tension towers, and wide-windowed factories; the oil drills pierce a million years of geologic strata, and the tortured earth belches a flaming curse of energy, beneath which the populations of our cities and towns are withered into automata.

This, then, is our Garden. These are the tempests and phantasma amid which the poet must wander alone, proclaiming his own soul in the teeth of a most ravaging Circumstance. For that is his duty, and his fated, heroic difference from other

men. Take any of the rough classifications into which we moderns fall. The average person can scarcely be said to exist at all outside of his special group. He is like a drop of faintly tinted water which appears colorless until it is merged with other drops in a glass. For example, you will scarcely recognize an advertising man as such if you meet him alone on Forty-Second Street, New York. But meet him in the bizarre concentration of an Advertising Club luncheon—ah! Then this nonentity begins to take on form and color. Subconsciously, of course, the nonentities recognize this, and there is a defensive psychology in the American passion for joining. A single Rotarian is a feather in a gale. But the International Rotary Clubs are nothing short of a portent. The terrified, screaming, psychic insufficiency of the Ku Klux Klan is, of course, only another variant of the same phenomenon.

Unfortunately, the poets themselves are not immune to this passion, which is understandable in the circumstances. For the artist, the burden of loneliness is heavy indeed in a civilization the most powerful forces of which seem to reject and condemn him. He must, nevertheless, project himself and his personal vision again and again upon this crass world where he appears so frail a figure. He must offer himself not as a servant or sycophant or entertainer, but as the arrogant lord and master of the feast: the Answerer, as Whitman put it. For him, whose mission is to possess the whole of life, no refuges are needed and all refuges are denied.

A strange and violent and dangerous place is our American Eden, but it is the only garden we have. The fruits hang high, and are terrible with the knowledge of good and evil, yet they must be plucked; and not by timorously theorizing little groups, but by isolated, outrageously pretentious adventurers who choose all the world and all time as the arena of their success or failure, and who acknowledge responsibility to no career that can be described or diagrammed in social terms, but only to the gay and egotistical quests of their own souls.

Meanwhile, of course, we maintain a considerable esthetic circus, with innumerable small arenas in which the contestants conduct bowling matches according to set rules. No sooner does Mr. A—score a ten-strike, than the identical ten-pins are set up on the other alley. Miss B—, with a gleam of sex-antagonism in her eye, elects a big ball or a little one, knocks them all over again, and the crowd applauds—somewhat hastily and perfunctorily, it is true, because there are so many arenas. It is good exercise, the performers are frequently skilful and graceful, usually sincere, and almost always unpretentious. But it has nothing to do with the Great Adventure.



Just what is the Great Adventure, and how does one recognize the Great Adventurer when he appears? To answer this question would be to attempt to set programs and make rules for genius, a folly which pedants and academic theorists especially delight in; surely the literature on this subject is already adequate. And surely it is enough of pretension, in a brief article, to indicate the prime conditions of the adventure, which are always the same. Nor do I mean to imply that nothing has happened in American poetry since Whitman. I think that a good deal has happened, but I think we are still awaiting an acceptance and vivification of the contemporary fact built to anything like the measure of Whitman's great prospectuses. And I think that modesty is a curious trait for a poet to be accused of, let alone confess.

Sometimes I think, to put it crudely, that our poets have been hopelessly intimidated by our Babbitts. If not, how comes it that the *Saturday Evening Post* dares to print its weekly budget of bad verse under the running head, "The Poet's Corner"? How is it that poetry is listed as "filler material" on the make-up charts of the magazines, not altogether excluding the highbrow ones?

It may be argued, of course, that the *Saturday Evening Post*, being full of automobiles, pirates, demi-vierges, anti-bolshevik "economics," and prune advertisements, is scarcely the place for poetry. Why not? Ring Lardner gets in, often with rather punishing satire. Personally, if I am to harangue a mob (often an excellent thing for both the poet and the mob) I want the largest mob that can be assembled. The mob that reads the poetry magazines is not big enough; nor is it hearty enough or noisy enough. Anyway, they can make their own poetry, or think they can.

If poetry is out of place in the *Saturday Evening Post*, where is it in place? In the *Dial* or the *Century* or the weekly journals of opinion or the special poetry journals or as "filler material" for *Munsey's* or *Snappy Stories*. I for one do not accept the sentence, which is the practical equivalent of declaring that poetry figures merely as a flimsy, non-structural decoration in the architecture of the civilization we are building; that it is not functional in relation to the social process as a whole.

Yet surely, poetry is as necessary as ethics or religion since it comprises the essence of both. It comprises, of course, much more.

Where I write this, the fields slope away in the green of newly sprouted barley to the point where the cliff line marks the land's end and the beginning of—is it sea or sky? I cannot tell, because the sun has not yet cleansed the shore waters of fog, and the ocean is merged with the sky in soft tones of gray and blue.

But about a mile out from shore is a reef, and as I watch, a wave curls white and breaks over the hidden rocks. It is the sea, I reflect, with a thrill of loving recognition, and the tide must be coming in.

In some such way one thinks of poetry. The ocean of human life floods and recedes, inarticulate, dumb, yet inexhaustible and pregnant with all significance, so that the murmur of those human tides is like a hand on one's heart. Now and then, from the plain of this gray expanse, a wave rears itself, erect and beautiful, challenging, leading.



That is poetry: a wave of intenser consciousness lifting itself out of the obscure ocean which a moment before seemed formless, empty, and without meaning. Poetry is as much a part of life as the wave is a part of the ocean. It is not a recoil from life, not a morbid secretion of life, but an essential function of life. If that function is allowed to atrophy for very long, the life of the race, considered as an organism, very soon loses vigor, control, and unity—although of course the cause and effect relation is mutual. If, as Santayana has said, poetry, like the other arts, adds a new dimension to experience, then surely that dimension is essential to the structure of man's world.

Just as the wave is the ocean in microcosm, so a good poem somehow escapes the limitations of time, class, and circumstance, and emerges as a complete and representative specimen of the race-stuff. There is no room for specialization or preciousness in this conception of poetry. In the poet's private life he may adopt some limited and specialized adjustment to his world and become, as Poe became, an editor; or a carpenter or a school teacher (Whitman made all three adaptations). But when he speaks as a poet, he speaks as the poet of the universe. He must offer himself as the archetype of human life, through whom the material world is sensed and its immaterial values focussed and arranged. He is important, first because he is universal, and second because he is expressive. Do not specialized and inarticulate editors of magazines, presidents of banks, superintendents of factories, engineers of railroads, clerks of stores, and diggers of ditches complete themselves humanly and achieve vicarious expression by reading poetry?



I realize, of course, that in all this I speak for a special point of view—my own; that the idea of the poet as the priest and the governor of the evolving social process is not one which finds expression very often in contemporary poetry or criticism. Yet this was the point of view of Nietzsche (the "transvaluation of values"). It was the point of view of Whitman, who thought of himself always as a combination of priest and orator. At one time he projected a sort of Chatauqua campaign in order that he might directly communicate himself and his inadequate but thrilling concept of "democracy" to the plain people who were then, and have since remained, cheerfully indifferent to his written work.

It was Whitman who wrote in one of his great and too much neglected prefaces:

As if it were necessary to trot back generation after generation to the eastern records. As if the beauty and sacredness of the demonstrable must fall behind that of the mythical! As if the opening of the western continent by discovery, and what has transpired in North and South America, were less than the small theatre of the antique or the aimless sleep-walking of the middle-ages!

I for one have always considered this passionate cleaving to the contemporary and the actual to be the very essence of Whitman's liberating service to

American letters. It is pretentious. It is also grand and bard-like.

Is "what has transpired in North and South America" in the last two decades material too huge and recalcitrant for the use of poetry? I do not see why it should be so.

I join the crowd of commuters boarding the eight o'clock train for the city. It seems to me a strange and terrible thing that all over the country millions of men like myself are journeying to their jobs to be caught up in the endless, dizzy revolutions of our national business machine. I walk down the aisle and everywhere I see newspapers held in front of faces, and I know that the slack or eager minds behind the faces are trying vainly and dazedly to absorb the kaleidoscopic changes of a monstrously overgrown mental environment. What a magnificent spectacle of folly! Into what farcical predicament has humanity fallen when millions of men think they have to muddy their minds with this hodge-podge of trivia every morning of their lives!



On Sunday I go to church, and with sincere unction and delight, join with the congregation in singing the words of the hymn:

There is a green hill far away
Without a city wall
Where the dear Lord was crucified
Who died to save us all.

I look up from my hymn book and see all about me the defeated and disintegrating faces of money-lender and merchant, clerk and pious spinster. Suddenly I feel the massed ugliness, the shoddy aspiration of those flimsy pillars and arches like a crushing weight upon my shoulders. The shadows cast by the stained glass windows are like the fingers of death. I would like to shout. I would like to chase the minister out of his pulpit and turn that service into a Dionysian carnival.

I say to myself that I must write about these things, yes, and in poetry. Maybe I shall. I am confident in any case that somebody will seize upon these or similar themes, and that if he writes well, the result will be fully as interesting and poetic as if he had chosen to write about some minor episode of his personal emotional life. Here I must admit a prejudice. I am fed up with poets who suffer. Is it not conceivable that the twentieth century is fed up with them? James Stephens wrote something the substance of which I should like to repeat, at the risk of misquoting: "Nothing that happens to an artist should do more than furnish him with a new subject of esthetic curiosity."

Surely the artist's creative apparatus is his instrument, something to be cared for, kept bright, and used, not talked about, except insofar as talk about it serves the artist's major objective of widening and deepening his own and his readers' consciousness of life. Anyway, why bother? There is so much else to write about in this American Eden, this intolerable wilderness of motion and noise; this theatre of side-splitting farce in politics and society; this vast prairie where leaderless human herds wander and bellow in terror and in wrath; this dumping ground of machine-misbegotten furniture, clothes, houses, ideas; this austere and necessitated shrine of each patriot's devotion—including, heaven help me, my own.

In the sudden death of Irene Stewart on May 24th, America lost one of the most promising of her younger poets. Her work during the last two years showed a steady gain in range and certainty. Her touch had become sure, she had learned to play exquisitely upon her instrument, when she was taken from it. Essentially a lyricist, in a rather songless age, she was adding new melodies to our verse and giving old melodies a new quality. To the delicate fancy of "The Little Queen's Sleep" and the eerie imagination of "The Island of Thorn," there was added a more poignant note of deathful meditation—strangely premonitory—in her later poems. Her short life—she was twenty-nine when she died—was passed entirely on the Pacific Coast, and the voiceless beauty of that region seemed at last about to find the human echo it had waited for so long in vain. Some of Irene Stewart's work has already found its way into the anthologies, but it is to be hoped that a collected edition of her poems—scattered through many magazines—may be published before it is too late to recover them. She belongs with Adelaide Crapsey among our slender and unfortunate "inheritors of unfulfilled renown."