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The Pulitzer Awards

THE awards this year of the Pulitzer prizes in creative literature have not aroused enthusiasm. When prizes which convey so much prestige are awarded annually, some dissent is to be expected always, and yet the decisions of the committees have usually run close to the best general opinion of critics competent to judge. This year is different. In fiction the prize has been given to "Years of Grace," a novel deserving of its rank as a best seller, worth writing and worth reading, but certainly not distinguished by literary art, nor outstanding in any of those qualities of originality, beauty, profundity, humor, or penetration which call for the brevet of an award supposed to be given for high excellence, not for popular success. Susan Glaspell's "Alison's House," which received the dramatic award, is also not to be compared as drama with most of the plays commended in the past. It is neither good theatre, nor distinguished literature, and its transcript of the life and influence of Emily Dickinson skirts the story of a burning soul without once reaching its heart. As for the Collected Poems of Robert Frost, which received the award in poetry, no one begrudges Frost an award for he always deserves it, yet it is highly questionable whether the same poems should twice receive the same prize, as is presumably the case in this collected edition of a former Pulitzer prize winner.

As one looks back over the history of the Pulitzer prizes in creative literature, the mistakes which time has confirmed as such seem due to two causes. Either the committees have been wrong or overruled when they were right, as was certainly the case in the notable instance of "Main Street," or they have made weak choices because there were no strong candidates that year among novels, plays, or poems, so that they were forced to choose between some new talent unsupported by past performance and experimental in nature, and acceptable mediocrity which was undistinguished but apparently safe. The collected edition of the Pulitzer works would show that on such occasions they have more than once preferred to choose the hopelessly second rate rather than to speculate in futures.

New masterpieces are not going to be hatched every year in the literary nests, as 1930 was not the first to prove, and annual awards taking cognizance only of what has happened in the last twelve months will be no better than the material presented to the judges. Also, the difficulty of judging in such a short perspective of time is bound to make a fortunate agreement more difficult. But why must the Pulitzer committees consider only a given work in its year of production? Why could not these prizes be awarded for the total production of a poet, or playwright, or novelist, why could they not be given to a writer, rather than to a book, and for a recognition of his literary and artistic reputation as it stands in the year of award? This would mean that Robert Frost would have received the Pulitzer prize when his achievement (of years or of a year) had made him indubitably worthy of it (all other rivals considered), and that having once been elevated to the Pulitzer rank, he would not again be a candidate. It would mean that if no more distinguished novel than "Years of Grace" was published in a given twelve months, the prize for fiction would go to a more distinguished novelist, who had not been chosen before, and whose total work, viewed for its importance from the standpoint of 1932 or 1933, seemed worthy of such a stamp of approval. Such a procedure, whereby the man rather than the specific book was chosen would, it is true, mean delay in most cases (but not all) for the new writer. Unless

Against Time

By LOUIS UNTERMAYER

THE event stands clear of history.
Originality
Is not in ranks of trees, but in this tree;
And every fruit is the first fruit,
Shapely and absolute.

Events are individual as pain.

This day, this trouble-fingering rain,
Has never been.
Beauty comes clean
In the cock's rusty vowels or in
Sky-searching towers that lift
Themselves light as a swift.

Time's a machine
That clocks the outworn, the untrue.
But we have seen
What no clock has recorded; we have seen
Time counted and completed; we have seen
Newness begetting newness, and the old
Refuse to die, take hold,
Assume free shape, deny the habitual mould;
While earth, love, substance grew
As it was made to do.
And the event stood new.

English Pronunciation

By R. W. CHAPMAN
Oxford University Press

INTEREST in this subject is widespread and keen. Dr. Vizetelly has recently published in *The Atlantic Monthly* a provocative and well-advertised utterance which will add fuel to the flames. That is all to the good; for fruitful discussion of this theme is much obstructed by ignorance, which controversy will do something to dissipate. I wish I thought myself strong enough to dissipate Dr. Vizetelly's misconception of "standard English," which seems to me profound. He tells us that "the best people of England" (the irony is his) speak a cockney dialect which has spread from Limehouse to Mayfair. How this has come about he does not tell us; nor does his description of this dialect, as "the pronunciation of the common people . . . with a few languid draws, terminal *aus*, clipped *g's*, and feeble *h's* thrown in for good measure," answer to anything I have heard spoken in Mayfair. But assume for a moment that the inhabitants of Mayfair learned the elements from Limehouse and picked up their extra mannerisms on their travels (dropping their *g's*, perhaps, in the hunting-field); how did this English "acquire the name of the Oxford voice?" *Semper ego auditor tantum?* I have lived in Oxford for some thirty years, and never yet lifted my voice to denounce this superstition.

How should the "people of Oxford" be so influential as to "debase the coinage of English speech with emasculated voices and exaggerated idiosyncrasies?" The *natives* of Oxford, for the most part, speak a South Midland dialect, with a very pronounced *r*, which resembles certain forms of American English at least as closely as it resembles "standard" English. The University of Oxford is a miscellaneous, and increasingly democratic, aggregation of persons. They come from all parts of the country, indeed from all parts of the English-speaking world. They have learned to talk before they come, and their speech has, of course, far less uniformity than the speech of an average community. The faculty (we call them dons) are likewise drawn from all districts and all classes; a good many of them are Scotsmen, speaking good educated Scots. If Oxford—or, for that matter, Cambridge—set out to teach the country how to pronounce, the only possible results would be confusion in the public mind and a lively correspondence in the newspapers. "What is the Oxford accent?" would be asked, and the answer would be learned at last, that there is no such thing.

It is perhaps a little hard that Dr. Vizetelly should put us in the pillory for mutilating our language, and should make no mention of the Oxford Dictionary or of the Society for Pure English. Dr. Vizetelly is a lexicographer, and must be aware that the editors of the Dictionary were not bred in Limehouse, nor in Mayfair, nor in Oxford. Sir James Murray was a Scot, Sir William Craigie is a Scot. Dr. Henry Bradley was a Midlander, Dr. Onions is a Midlander. It is well known that the pronunciations recognized by the Dictionary are by no means those of the more careless forms of Southern English. The Society for Pure English is also an Oxford product, and its publications have done more than any agency of our time to promote sound learning, historical and phonetic, about pronunciation, and have given wider opportunities of reasoned speculation. To listen to the resonant and virile speech of Robert Bridges, founder and prop of that society, was a study in enunciation. It was gruff (at least in old age), yet sensitive; precise, yet free from any pedantry. The tracts of the society are full of good sense

This Week

"Jonathan Gentry."

Reviewed by STANLEY J. KUNITZ.

"Red Bread."

Reviewed by ARTHUR RUHL.

"John Mistletoe."

Reviewed by ABBÉ DIMNET.

"The Life of François Rabelais."

Reviewed by ALBERT JAY NOCK.

"In the Goldfish Bowl."

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

"The Shiny Night."

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD.

"Round about Parnassus."

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT.

Next Week, or Later

"Dawn."

Reviewed by ROBERT HERRICK.

his success was outstanding, as with "John Brown's Body," or "The Bridge of San Luis Rey," he would have to wait, as he does now, but he would wait with the certainty of recognition, for if his first or second book was really first rate, the judges of his third and fourth would have had time to find it out, and could give him as much credit for his past as for his present performance. Best of all, there would be no excuse for a comfortable settling upon evident, though successful, mediocrity. Three books worth crowning may be lacking in any given year such as this one, but not three creative artists in literature worthy of being joined to the elect.

on problems of pronunciation; and they do not make the mistake of supposing that a very difficult subject is an easy one.

The degree of Dr. Vizetelly's familiarity with Oxford may be guessed from his examples. The people of Oxford, he tells us, "believe in cultchah." Now, I do not suppose there is any place in which you are less likely to hear that word, which has long been a kind of joke among educated Englishmen (sometimes, I regret to add, a joke with a glance at Massachusetts). "Instead of saying Oh no," we "say Oo noo, or Aw naw, or even Ow now." This, I submit, is neither good phonetics nor good Billingsgate. It is, of course, admitted that many of the vowel sounds of standard English are technically "impure." They may be none the worse for that; the great range and the subtle variation of its vowel system are thought by some to be the chief beauty of our language. But whatever Dr. Vizetelly thinks we say, when we mean "Oh no," it cannot be laid to the door of Oxford, which pronounces and tolerates every known variety of that vowel.

"Go into any church and listen to the clergyman reading the service or preaching. Few can hear what the man is saying; fewer still can understand him. How very different it is over here!" Well, we all like what we know best. When I land at Southampton, the accents of the porters on the Southern Railway strike sweetly on my ear; and I do not grudge Dr. Vizetelly his pleasure in the speech of the taxi-driver who meets him at the New York docks. But patriotic preferences should not be buttressed by groggy facts. The argument from a liturgy, is not good; can Dr. Vizetelly follow the services in Rome or Paris? His statement that sermons are inaudible to an English congregation is absurd. I have suffered from sermons; but I never found it possible not to hear the preacher, even if I preferred my own thoughts.



The bias and special pleading which detract from the value of Dr. Vizetelly's observations are strangely at variance with the charity of his exordium. He sets out by declaring that "our accepted standard of correct speech rests on those members of the community who speak the language with accuracy, clearness, elegance, and propriety. They do not all speak in the same way. God be thanked that they could not if they would!" The catholic faith could not be better stated. Uniformity is not to be desired. "To abstract the mind from all local emotion"—wrote Johnson in a different but not dissimilar context—"would be impossible, if it were endeavored, and would be foolish, if it were possible." Not the least of the dangers that beset a democratized and standardized education is the danger that it may flatten local differences into a mechanical sameness. If we were trying, which we are not, to impose "Oxford" English on the world, we should fail, and we should deserve to fail. For standard English, imperfectly learned, with its negligence exaggerated and caricatured, is a very ugly mongrel. But a certain measure of uniformity, in districts and in classes, is not only convenient, it is inevitable. For how otherwise shall we learn the tricks of speech than by imitation of our parents, our teachers, and our associates? Since, therefore, "standard" English, the English which, generally speaking, prevails in the English "professional" classes, is not the least important of the many recognized dialects, it is desirable that its nature should be better understood. Its basis is the speech of Southern England. One of its salient characteristics is that *r* is not trilled (South English *virile* differs from the *virile* of New England, but differs more widely from the *virile* of Scotland), and that final *r* is not sounded except to avoid *hiatus* with a following vowel. Any divergence from this norm, in an educated speaker, indicates that he is not of Southern origin.

But standard English is now the language of a class far more than it is the language of a region. Phonetically, England is not a democracy, and the speech of London has far less uniformity than has the speech of those, who, whatever their local origin, have had in common a certain kind of education and environment. The typical custodians of this standard are not the universities, but the schools which we call public, that is the boarding schools recruited, for the most part, from our least indigent classes. In these schools, and in similar environments, the plastic youth of Britain insensibly acquires a speech which, though by no means of a drab uniformity, is sufficiently uniform, and sufficiently distinctive, to be at once recognized by those who are

familiar with it. We do not expect to hear it, as a matter of course, in any given place where men congregate; when we do hear it, we know it for what it is.

That this English is a model of "accuracy, clearness, elegance, and propriety" not its best friends would maintain. Its most glaring defect, and its greatest peril, is a tendency to slurring and to the confusion of vowels which should be distinct. The peril seemed at one time to be aggravated by the good intentions of phonetic spellers, who threatened to stereotype the negligences of rapid or careless speech, and so to close the path of redemption. I once heard one of these reformers make an amusing confession. Having proved, by strict phonetics, that in rapid speech we say "Hit on the head," he tried to teach a foreign student to copy this colloquialism; the nearest the pupil could get was "Hit 'im," with a perceptible pause between the words. The truth is that no stereotyped spelling can be truly phonetic. For though we say "Bread 'n' butter" in the intimacy of the breakfast table, we do not say "Alpha 'n' omega" in the solemnity of ritual. But some of the fallacies of phonetic spelling have been exposed, and the danger from these crusaders seems now less menacing.



The evils to which standard English is exposed are those to which every form of English is exposed. They are illiteracy, carelessness, and coarseness, whether of the intellect or of the emotions. These can be, and are, mitigated by the efforts of preachers, professors, radio announcers, and other pedagogues, who are privileged to hold up to their audiences the standard of a more accurate enunciation than is necessary, or even desirable, for the campus or the fireside. They are better engaged in thus stemming the flood of ignorance and laziness than in throwing stones across the Atlantic. I suspect that the acrimony with which "Oxford" English is sometimes criticized arises from a consciousness that this brand of English possesses qualities not easily imitated. It has, I believe, a clarity of tone that makes it exceptionally pleasant to hear, and a certain elasticity that makes it a subtle instrument of expression, by which the *nuances* of the speaker's mood and intention are readily conveyed. This may be, to some extent certainly is, a matter of habituation. The better we know the speech of a region, a class, or an individual, the more readily and accurately do we interpret its variations. But it is true, I think, that standard English is, in itself, more flexible, and therefore less monotonous and more significant, than the English of agricultural laborers or the English of Australia. It is not, as Dr. Vizetelly may be thought to imply, the debased speech of an effete and languid aristocracy. None the less, if you should wish to hear good specimens—accurate, clear, and elegant—of British English, you may do worse than attend a debate in the House of Lords. Certainly you will go far before you hear an English more musical than the late Lord Balfour's, more polished than the late Lord Oxford's, or more cogent than Mr. Stanley Baldwin's.



Fascinating as these speculations are, for most of us they are less important, as they are less comprehensible, than the more elementary questions of pronunciation on which Dr. Vizetelly also pronounces. I mean such questions as whether the first half of *patent* shall conform to *pat* or to *pate* (and whether it is reasonable to choose the former, if we model *latent* on *late*); whether *fragile* shall rhyme with *file* or with *fill*; whether *extraordinary* has six syllables or five. On these points there is excessive and vexatious uncertainty. People are not even consistent with themselves; and if you ask a man whether he says *ephemeral* or *ephemeral*, he may be unable to tell you. It is worth while, therefore, to aim at agreement, where agreement is possible—as it is certainly not possible on such a point as the sounding of *r*. But no good is done by a string of dogmatic assertions, which may be countered by denials equally emphatic. It is first necessary to ascertain the relevant facts. This may be done by reference to such works as "The English Language in America," by Professor George P. Krapp of Columbia, published by the Century Company in 1925, or the very handy "Pronunciation, A Practical Guide to American Standards," recently produced by Messrs. Larsen and Walker. (This is an Oxford book, and I ought to confess that one of the authors took an Oxford degree; but as he is also of Toronto, and his collaborator is of Harvard, perhaps their virility may pass muster). Useful, however, as these books are, they are content for the most part to state the prob-

lems and leave them unsolved. Little serious attempt has yet been made towards their solution; little, that is, in relation to the magnitude of the task.

But again I would refer to the Tracts of the Society for Pure English, in which some of these questions are debated with full knowledge and without violence of asseveration. Dr. Bridges, for example, in his examination of the recommendations of the British Broadcasting Company's experts, covers the whole ground (for the pronunciations in questions), giving due weight not only to history and analogy but also to convenience (e.g., audibility, and avoidance of homophones), and to euphony. I am not suggesting that we should resign the right of choice to an academy of experts. Neither the Society for Pure English nor any other authority is at all likely to command universal consent. But no progress can be made unless we are willing to shed some of our prejudices, and to pay some heed to informed and temperate discussion.

An American Epic

JONATHAN GENTRY. By MARK VAN DOREN.
New York: Albert & Charles Boni. 1931. \$2.50.

Reviewed by STANLEY J. KUNITZ
Author of "Intellectual Things"

IN our time the epic narrative—poetry's right arm—has been paralyzed not only by the dominance of the omniform and polytechnic novel, but also, directly and indirectly, by the inventions, discoveries, and skepticisms of science. There is much death in that arm. What chiefly remains vital is an elaborate lyric nerve, sensitive and inflamed. The formal epic, requiring both a myth and an audience, is hardly conceivable today, although narrative poems with varying degrees of epic quality continue to be written.

In his long poem, "Jonathan Gentry," Mark Van Doren has not, I feel, either adumbrated the destination of the form or exhausted his own virtues as a poet. A poem of such length requires an impulse extraordinary in kind, in strength, and in persistence. There is no real magnitude, however, in the conception of "Jonathan Gentry." In the end we are left with the rural-domestic tragedy told in the concluding third book or chapter, "Foreclosure." It is a capably managed and occasionally affecting tale, but its outlines are familiar:

A farmer (Jonathan Gentry Fifth) and his childless wife (Laura). The drought. The visitor from the city (Jonathan's brother Joe). The lure of the city. Laura's subterranean love for Joe, the cityman. The flight from the farm. Death of Laura.

These are stock characters acting in a stock situation. I. A. Richards would add that these ingredients are capable of producing only a stock response.

That is not being perfectly just to Mr. Van Doren. He has been more ambitious than a bald synopsis can suggest. His narrative has a certain dimension in time as well as in space. He has attempted, with a sound historical consciousness, in the earlier and briefer chapters of his work ("Ohio River 1800" and "Civil War"), to prepare for the frustration of Jonathan Gentry Fifth, to make it signify the pitiful event of pioneer ideals, the defeat of the whole line of Gentrys,—of the first Jonathan, who sailed on the Ohio River in search of land; and of that other ancestral Jonathan, who fought against the South in company with his brother ("because we love the land we live on") and who returned to the land alone. The attempt, it must be said, does not succeed, partly because of a failure to sustain momentum through the discontinuities of the structure, but chiefly because there is little room for such a theme in the close pattern of the narrative movement. The verse in the end becomes curiously opaque, smothering its meaning within itself.

In "Jonathan Gentry" the gnomic quality of Mark Van Doren's lyric expression is almost wholly eliminated, and the devious psychological explorations, so crisply denoted in his shorter pieces, appear exiguous and pale. The blank verse, varied by uneven rhythms and rhymed stanzas, is efficient, but it has not yet achieved unique character. Somewhere between Mr. Van Doren's use of the Frost colloquial:

Weather's a game, and the sky uses us—
Up with the wind and down with the wind, then lying
Patient upon a corner of the board,
Waiting to be picked off with a wet finger.
Weather's a game that we are only played with.

and his more successful use of the Robinson philosophic: