

The Iowa Writers' Conference

By HARRY HANSEN

MR. Norman Foerster's first Conference on Creative Writing at the University of Iowa took place on October 29, 30, and 31, a week after that brilliant assemblage of Southern writers met at the University of Virginia. By a coincidence men who had played an important part in education in the south dominated the Iowa meeting, thereby removing any possible suspicion that it might be devoted to the exploitation of regionalism. As a matter of fact the Conference had little enough in common with what became known over ten years ago as the Middle Western school, which was made up almost entirely of writers whom Professor Irving Babbitt would classify as adherents of the Rousseau heresy.

Mr. Foerster's views on the needs of the creative artist are well known; as a student under Professor Babbitt he comes to Iowa from Harvard by way of the University of North Carolina. Now director of the School of Letters at Iowa, he may be expected to place a heavier weight for tradition and discipline into the scales than did John T. Frederick, whose Midland permitted the writer a wide latitude. Mr. Foerster is no less hospitable to promise and ambition, but he is much more likely to insist on intensive study of masterpieces and a knowledge of comparative literature; it may be noted that in proposing certain objectives for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the field of creative writing he puts proficiency in technique first and possession of creative energy second as desirable qualities in a candidate.

The Conference profited by the presence of the Conference of English Teachers, which cooperated with Mr. Foerster's meetings. This crowded the stately rooms of the Old Capitol, a lovely building, which, by the dignified lines of its portico and the formal character of its doors and windows, reminds one how far the Greek revival of one hundred years ago extended its influence. Halls that once resounded with the angry debate of territorial legislators—farmers in hobnailed boots who, no doubt, emphasized their arguments with inkwells and chairs—now echoed with talk of imaginative writing, freedom of expression, tradition and experiment, technique and liberation—phrases always heard at a conference, although not necessarily allied with creative writing.

Whatever Mr. Foerster's leanings, he made no attempt to pack the meeting with sympathizers. His speakers were, for the most part, far from the humanist camp. Dean Addison Hibbard of Northwestern University, once of the South, could no doubt qualify; Professor Edwin Ford Piper of the University of Iowa likewise presented the scholarly ideal, but "Barbed Wire and Wayfarers" often acknowledges no rhythms save those of the wind as it sweeps over fields of grain. Zona Gale, who gave the opening lecture, had been known to approve that spade-work in American writing which uncovered the ugliness of life on American soil, even though she now yearned for beauty amid the commonplace. But Floyd Dell and Ruth Suckow were, I am afraid, of another confession, and Gerald W. Johnson, for all his association with the school of journalism at the University of North Carolina, brought into the program the breeziness of the editorial offices of the Baltimore *Sun*. We had Gorham B. Munson for a balance wheel, but he was not anxious to be classified.

The rift between the American author of today and the university was on Mr. Foerster's mind; he deplored it especially when he announced his hopes for a course which should give the creative writer the tools of literature without stifling his initiative. The conventional course in composition, a part of freshman English, was unsuitable. Authors who have never entered the portals of a university now dominate American letters. Mr. Foerster spoke of the lesson of the past—Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Landor, Tennyson, Arnold, Morris, Swinburne were university men; in America, Bryant, Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Lowell, James, and many others received a university education, some of them even taught. To unite writers once more with the university, Mr. Foerster proposed a school of writing which should give writers complete freedom from regimentation, while

placing the legacies of the ages at their disposal.

Young writers, he said, should meet where, when, as long, and as often as they wished, carrying on at the same time a course in the history of the fine arts or some creative work, such as freehand drawing. They would learn the best in literature and for cultural purposes study history, philosophy, or religion, read foreign masterpieces. They might later discover themselves better fitted for teaching than writing, but if they wished to continue studying while writing, the university should provide room for them in its graduate school. For the A.M. degree Mr. Foerster proposed a seminar, a sort of literary club presided over by a sympathetic professor, with a general examination on literature at the end of the term. For the Ph.D. degree he also asked an examination on traditional literature, culture, technique, and criticism.

"His dissertation," continued Mr. Foerster, "should be a piece of imaginative writing, a play, or novel, or poem, published under reputable auspices. The only requirements of this culminating piece of imaginative writing are, first, that it illustrates the writer's proficiency in technique, his ability to discover and control a mode of expression suited to what he has to say; and, secondly, that it illustrates the writer's possession of creative energy, the sort of energy that distinguishes the really promising young author, who writes with a certain authority and seems to promise continuous growth. So much we have a right to ask of candidates for our highest degree. But we have no right to go on to prescribe the direction to be taken by the writer's energy, the view of life for which he is seeking to find a fit vehicle, the particularism to which he consciously or unconsciously adheres. He must be free to find himself, or to hang himself. At most we can demand only a certain unity of vision, a certain inner clearness as to his purpose."

Mr. Foerster added that a school of letters can hardly produce many authors, "but assuredly it can produce better teachers than our young writers sit under today." He said that the plan has already been carried into effect in the University of Iowa.

Irving B. Richman, Iowa historian, spoke on behalf of the subjective interpretation of history; William L. Sowers, assistant professor of English, who has been active in the production of original plays, and Frank Luther Mott, director of the School of Journalism and author of "A History of American Magazines," presided at the sessions. The discussion was enlivened by the vigorous presentation of a psychoanalytical theory of writing by Floyd Dell, who was eagerly listened to. Mr. Dell later elucidated in his lecture the conviction that all writing was the expression of an inner urge which could not be channelled by education and which lost its validity the moment it was subjected to such programs as were proposed by universities. This heretical pronouncement, delivered with all the intensity of which Mr. Dell was capable, was made without reservations of any kind, the effect of it being to make conferences such as this and even universities completely negligible from the standpoint of creative writing. Although the applause was enthusiastic, Mr. Dell did not divert the main business of the proceeding, which, after all, was a recognition of the need of discipline and study by the artist who wished his growth to be "that of a tree, not a cloud." Mr. Gorham Munson sat unmoved, Mr. Edwin Ford Piper remained smiling, Mr. Foerster was unperturbed. Later someone sought a definition of creative writing and failed to get it, even though Harlan Hatcher, who had done his share of it in "Tunnel Hill," had come from Ohio State University to attend the meeting and was present in the audience. But although this term failed of precise definition, the Conference was definitely successful; it brought together men and women of different views, posed a problem, stimulated wide interest, and turned the thoughts of teachers to the importance of preserving and developing originality amid the routine of education.

Harry Hansen, literary Editor of the New York "World Telegram," was born at Davenport, Iowa, and in attending the Iowa conference was returning to familiar ground.

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Points of View

The Mysterious Madame

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*: Sir:

Under the caption of "Biography" there appeared in the columns of your issue of October 24th, a review of "The Mysterious Madame," re-echoing the charges of charlatanism and immorality made by the author, and which have, in the past few months, been hurled at the fair name and moral status of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, who died in 1891.

May we, therefore, call your attention to the following facts?

"The Mysterious Madame," which purports to be an authentic biography of H. P. Blavatsky, says nothing whatsoever about the philosophy which she taught, and the contents of this book clearly show that the author is not familiar with her works, although their names have been placed in his bibliography. During the twenty years (1871-1891) of her public life, as the chief teacher of Theosophy, she was attacked many times. It is a striking fact that the logic and cogency of her teachings have never been seriously questioned, nay more, there have been

hardly any attacks on the ideas and views presented.

The *New York Sun*, at that time the most widely circulated and influential of dailies, after having repeated these charges and after being unable to prove their veracity, became convinced of the great wrong perpetrated through its pages; finally, in an editorial article, in the year 1892, this newspaper made unreserved apology. The entire narrative of the *Sun* case is available in pamphlet form. But now the compiler of "The Mysterious Madame" brings up the same old charges, without any reference to the above recorded facts. What can be, then, the *bona fides* of this author!

Taking merely one of the statements of your reviewer, namely that of "Isis Unveiled" falling dead from the press," the facts are otherwise. Not only has "Isis Unveiled" been continuously in print ever since its publication in 1877, but the increasing demand for it throughout these years has culminated, as a mark of tribute from loyal students, in a facsimile reproduction of the first edition, the two original volumes now being bound into one.

The same is true of that monumental work, "The Secret Doctrine," first printed

in 1888, in two volumes. These also were reprinted as a photographic reproduction, and bound into one volume, in 1925.

Those desiring to ascertain the true facts about Madame Blavatsky and her life's work, can do no better than consult "The History of the Theosophical Movement," published by E. P. Dutton & Company.

As for those who are bent on charging Madame Blavatsky with plagiarism—as well accuse Edison of having stolen "light" from Nature! As she herself points out in her Introductory to "The Secret Doctrine," that faithful transmission of a few of the tenets of the Ageless Wisdom,—“I may repeat what I have stated all along, and which I now clothe in the words of Montaigne:

I have here made only a nosegay of culled flowers, and have brought nothing of my own but the string that ties them.

Her aim was to elevate the race; her method was to deal with the mind of the century as she found it, by trying to lead it on step by step; to seek out and educate a few, who, appreciating the majesty of the Secret Science and devoted to "the great orphan Humanity," could carry on her work with zeal and wisdom.

Furthermore, we may say that the *Aryan Path*, an international magazine of

wide interests and influence, published in Bombay, India, with offices in London and New York, has consistently shown its devotion to the philosophy of Theosophy as taught by H. P. Blavatsky, by emphasizing her teachings. This journal is not connected with any Theosophical Society. It is devoted to the consideration of the great ideas found in the principal literatures, philosophies, and religions of the world; of all activities, irrespective of political parties or shibboleths, working for human betterment; of all movements which spiritually advance the thought of the race. This is Theosophy, the truths uttered by the great seers, sages, poets, writers existing in every nation from modern times extending back into the prehistoric past—not the present current misconceptions clustered around the name.

All inquiries regarding the subjects under discussion will be gladly welcomed by the undersigned.

C. E. PORTER
M. S. PAIGE

THE ARYAN PATH,
119 West 57th Street, New York City.

Bermuda

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*: Sir:

An appreciation of Mr. Morley's notes on Bermuda in the *Saturday Review*. Oh land of shining cedars, of snow-white cottages and winding roads, of glowing winter gardens, odorous lily fields, and sky-blue bays—that I knew so well a score of years ago! Long may she preserve her pristine innocence and calm, untroubled by snorting motor cars, seven o'clock commutation trains, and all the hurly-burly and hullabaloo of modern life.

I would not abolish the motor car if I could, or even the talkie house, but it is good to know that there is still a place within two days' journey of our shores where red and yellow gas stations and boulevard signs have never been, where the journey and the blue sky above are still worth more than the destination, where to "loaf and invite your soul" is still benignly possible, and where a hen, or even a man, may cross the road without inviting sudden death.

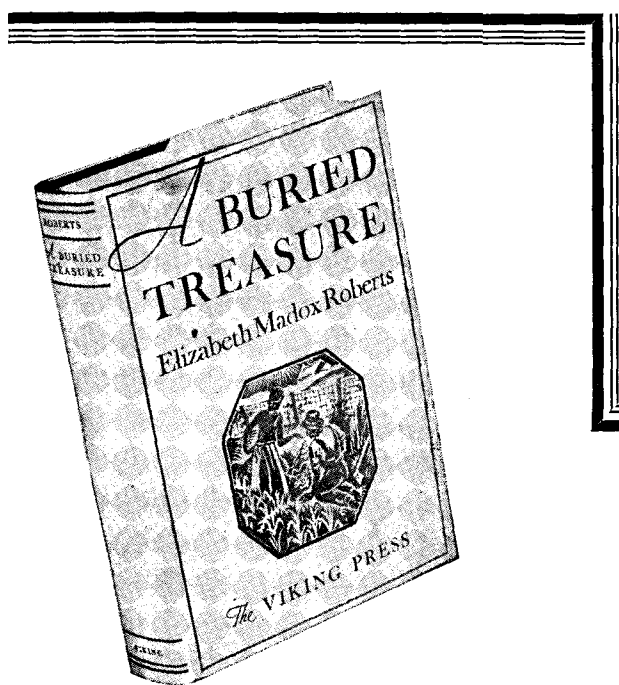
The beauty of the older days and simpler ways is more clearly visible to me than that of our own times, magnificent as these are in some of their achievements. It's my own fault, no doubt, but a sailboat on the sea's rim is more beautiful to me than the speediest of speed launches, and a running horse more thrilling than any high-powered car. (I will own that the airplane is a poem.) You may have seen some of my historical fiction, for instance, "Walter of Tiverton," "The Torchbearers" and two or three others brought out by the Appletons in the past ten years. I have even written a romance of Bermuda in the time when it was inhabited chiefly by bandits and wild hogs; but this has not yet seen the light. It has a virtuous heroine, and probably, in these sophisticated days, well deserves oblivion.

Some of the Bowling Green's enthusiasms wake responsive chords. Old John Donne certainly had things to say, and it is good to see Herman Melville coming into his own after a half century of neglect. By the way, how instructive it would be for some of our academic critics to study the solemn pronouncements of their spiritual predecessors of fifty, a hundred, or two hundred years ago and compare them with the verdict of successive generations of lovers of literature. In 1820 if a congress of L.L.D.'s, critics, and publishers had been asked to name the greatest British novelist and the greatest British poet of their time, nine out of ten would have named Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron. Some would have mentioned Wordsworth with faint praise and most would have named Shelley only to disparage him. Probably a majority would not have known there were such persons as Jane Austen and John Keats. And now we realize that it is precisely these names, and not those of worthy Sir Walter and the passionate creator of Don Juan, that are the glory of English literature in that great period.

Of course we are much better informed and could never make similar errors. But how the great white swans of the 'nineties have shrunk in size and how diminished the lustre of their plumage!

BERNHARD MARSHALL.

Berkeley, Calif.



A BURIED TREASURE

by ELIZABETH
MADOX ROBERTS

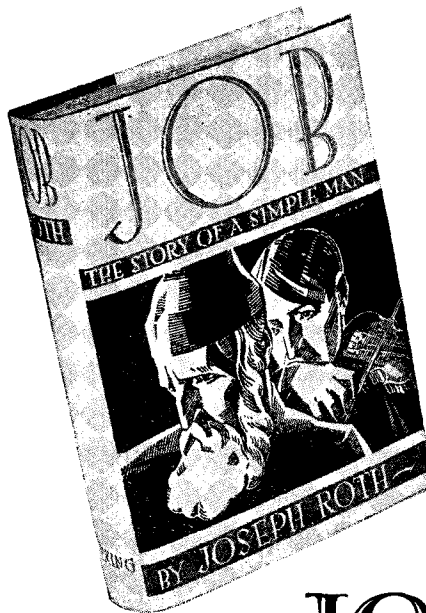
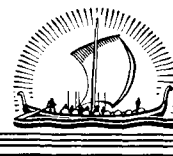
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