

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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Wrapped in Cellophane

HERE is Dr. Gogarty saying that his old friend Joyce never smiles when he is humorous, and so is often misunderstood. "Ulysses," it appears, has not always been correctly read by serious-minded critics.

Critics of the United States have also, sometimes, taken the surface symptoms of their subject too seriously. As the expensive veneer of shaving-cream and interior-decorator civilization which advertising writers were making for us begins to crack up under stress of hard times, this country begins to have a different and rather familiar look. Standardization had not gone so far as we supposed.

Last summer one of the shrewdest observers of American life (name on request) travelled by bus with frequent stops from New York to New Mexico and back. It was his purpose to learn what was under the veneer of similarity that makes every American town look like every other American town, and every Main Street a little like Broadway. He talked in drug stores and speakeasies, he examined the magazine racks in the local news stores, he sat down in those creaky chairs at the edge of the dusty roads which Willa Cather describes in her stories of the corn belt, he listened in corner stores and post offices.

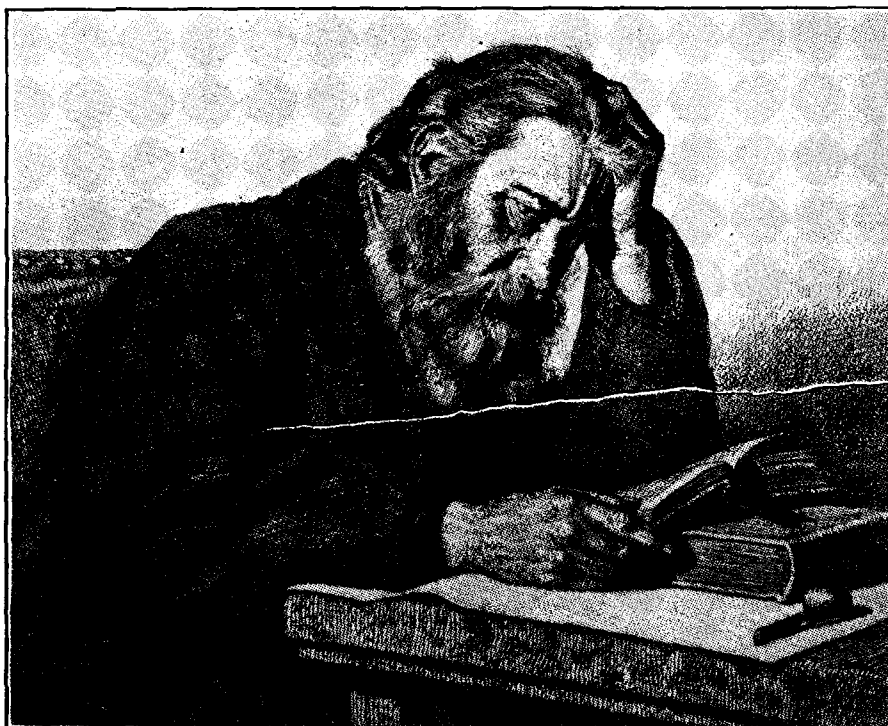
What he found was a smouldering resentment, not conscious, not articulate, but active, against the efforts to civilize the United States by snobism—those printed threats that not to use somebody's toothpaste meant social ruin, those persuasive pictures intended to prove that a stiff collar, a clean shave, and a sweet breath were silver rungs on the golden ladder of success. And he found that poverty, unrest, and insecurity were bringing out the repressed localisms, renewing an old and half-forgotten sense that it was important to be one's self in one's own community rather than a tailor's dummy made to look like New York. He noticed, with interest, that when he had crossed the Mississippi the natives began to speak of him as a "foreigner."

And he said that he felt a kind of dumb longing for a new ideal of living and working in the United States, which would be different from the brassy Babbittism of the advertising pages, and different from the conception of success which had been current since the war. The people were beginning to talk of the past with affection, wondering whether it would not be better, if it were possible, to go back twenty years and start over again. They seemed to be uncomfortably aware that the boom town with a headache in which they were living was not quite what had been intended. They had all the modern conveniences but they seemed, by comparison with their fathers, to be anonymous.

That is what he noticed, with that playwright's imagination that feels the significance behind casual words. And if he is right it is equally significant that for some years now biographies and histories dealing with the American past have become vigorous human documents full of life and color, instead of the "scientific" treatises to which the last generation aspired, and that regional fiction and historical fiction and drama have come back with a rush.

The standardizing processes of culture never cease so long as there is a civilization to spread, for standardization is only an efficiency method by which civilization

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THE COURTEOUS READER.
Recaptioned from an etching by Paul Drury and reproduced from
"Fine Prints of the Year 1932" (Minton, Balch).

Courteous Reader

By CHAUNCEY BREWSTER TINKER

Gentle Reader, I desire no better Patron for this my rustic Dialogue than thy favourable smile . . . I referre my bold enterprise to thy best censure, and these homely lines to thy most favourable construction.—A Curry-Combe for a Core-Combe. 1615.

MISS LAURA RIDING, high-priestess of the modern movement in English poetry, not long ago protested to the *Times Literary Supplement* about its reception of her latest poem, "Laura and Francisca." The reviewer of this unusual volume had described the poetess as employing "a gnomic mode of expression" and "a private idiom," which place the poem beyond the comprehension of the average reader. Not only must it be discovered that the two females referred to in the title are one and the same person (various projections, I assume, of a single ego), but one must accustom oneself to a highly individualized style in which the poem is described as

A little all that more is
According to the trouble you can take.
The reviewer seemed to imply that the number who would take the trouble was not large. At this Miss Riding took umbrage, and protested. The burden of understanding a poet's experience is, she contends, "on the reader"; the author cannot be the "slave" of persons of unknown capacity for response.

The reader is in the position of calling on me, not of being called on by me . . . nor do I hawk my hospitality. I give out indication of my willingness to dispense hospitality on a basis that preserves my integrity as a host. When I say, "I am at home," I am being sincerely friendly. When criticism replies, "So am I," it is being meanly facetious.

Now all this is highly significant, not because of the wrath of the lady—for poets have been indignant at reviewers ever since they began to practise—but because of the way in which the reader is treated by the author. The hostess declines to make much of him or to woo him with jam and judicious advice. He must

not expect the poet to supply him with wits or a "capacity for response."

The time is past when the reader could expect flattery and thanks from the maker of the book, who pretended that he cared for nothing else in life, inasmuch as it was for the gentle reader that the song was sung, and for him that the story was written. Even if the listeners were not many, it was proper for the poet to express a certain gratitude to them, and to boast of having an audience fit though few. But now the reader may half suspect that he is about to be shouldered out of the poetic world altogether. The poets too frequently suggest that they belong to an order apart, that they have decided to write for themselves and let the reader go hang. Their poetry is written to "release the ego," or to satisfy the performer, not the auditor. And so Miss Riding sits "at home,"

Like a high-born maiden
In a palace-tower,

easing her laden soul by singing to herself. If the wayfarer chooses to go in unto her, he must not expect to be welcomed with anything like gratitude, nor must he interrupt or ask to understand. He must not even pretend to comprehend too much of it all, because it is not for him that the music is sung. It is the utterance of an intensely vivid consciousness, which may or may not be intelligible to him, but which is "torturing" the unwilling words "to its own likeness." If the reader is incapable of a response, he had better retire quietly from the scene, and buy a detective story. The gods did not make him poetical, and there's an end on't.

Well, it has been thought through the ages that readers were all too prone to retire from the scene, and that such few as betrayed a disposition to remain and listen were worth winning. If a little cajolery would hold them, the poet did not hesitate to employ it. Thus Tasso, in lines finely rendered by the Elizabethan Fairfax:

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In the Trough

THE YEARS OF THE LOCUST (AMERICA, 1929-1932). By GILBERT SELDES. Boston: Little Brown & Company. 1933. \$3.

Reviewed by WILLIAM MACDONALD

MR. SELDES tells the story of three fateful years, not primarily in terms of events, although his pages teem with statistics and data, but in those of public opinion and feeling, of what common people and leaders said and thought, and of certain doubts and tendencies which emerged from the gloom. Two-thirds of the way through the book he embodies his view of the period in a graphic "fever chart," in which a red line, "intended to mark, roughly, the psychological temperature and to record excitements, despairs, accesses of faith or scepticism, hopes, enthusiasms, and apathy" is imposed upon a black line showing the trend of prices of ninety selected stocks, with such legends as "the great smash," "within sixty days," "buy now," "wages cut," "moratorium," "draft Coolidge," "scraping bottom," and "crying for a dictator" marking the alternations of shock, fear, hope, and yearning. Nothing so vivid about the great depression, or so acute in its analysis of the national state of mind and the influences which produced and moulded it, or so well worth reading by whoever would get official dust and popular cobwebs out of his eyes, has yet been written about the tragic epoch which began in the fall of 1929 and, alas, is still with us.

The popular notion that the stock market crash in October, 1929, was due primarily to a speculative orgy in which everybody was involved finds no favor with Mr. Seldes. What broke down was a system which expanded production before there was a market, and then sought to create a market by advertising, high pressure salesmanship, instalment buying, and other devices. The crash, in other words, followed a boom which "carried with it the seeds of destruction." An ingenious and novel analysis leads to the conclusion that not more than 5,000,000 people, or one

This Week

WHY SOULS ARE HIDDEN.

By JOHN RUSSELL MCCARTHY.

"BULA MATARI."

Reviewed by ELLSWORTH HUNTINGTON.

"JEHOL—CITY OF EMPERORS."

Reviewed by ROY CHAPMAN ANDREWS.

"ART, LIFE AND NATURE IN JAPAN."

Reviewed by KENNETH SAUNDERS.

"TALKS WITH MUSSOLINI."

Reviewed by LEONARD BACON.

"BRITISH AGENT."

Reviewed by HAROLD NICOLSON.

"ONE MORE SPRING."

Reviewed by HERSCHEL BRICKELL.

"THE BRIDGE."

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD.

"L'AIGLON."

Reviewed by H. L. PANGBORN.

THE FOLDER.

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

AUNT ABIGAIL.

By MARY ROBERTS BERRY.

Next Week, or Later

THE MESSAGE AND THE MIDDLEBROW.

By MARGARET WIDDEMER.

in twenty-five of the population, were "actually speculating" in 1929, and even that figure, Mr. Seldes seems to think, may be twice too large; but virtually the whole country fell victim to the boom.

Broadly speaking, the interval between October, 1929, and the presidential campaign of 1932 falls into two periods, the first characterized by a policy of doing nothing, in the hope that matters would presently right themselves, and the second by "the effort to do everything." The most conspicuous figure throughout is, of course, Mr. Hoover. Until the middle of 1930 Mr. Seldes sees Mr. Hoover as still a leader, but after that time the country knew that the President "would neither lead nor be led," and his titular leadership, "defending with bitterness the 'rugged individualism' which he believed to be the American system," took on in the public mind the character of "a complete negative." People listened to repeated assurances of early recovery, read Mr. Coolidge's daily articles, went temporarily crazy over miniature golf, watched the operations of the Red Cross and the multiplying plans for relief, saw the attempt to maintain wages collapse and unemployment mount, lost confidence in banks and the wisdom of business leaders, and turned with increasing interest to reports of industrial progress in Soviet Russia and the stream of proposals for national economic planning.

Mr. Seldes is inclined to defend, or at least to explain, Mr. Hoover's policy in the first period of the depression on the ground that, given his training, his surroundings, and his economic and political ideas, he could not well have acted differently. There is still restrained apology after the failure of the moratorium. Unlike the Chinese philosopher who is said to have written one of his greatest books while waiting for a customs examination of his luggage, Mr. Hoover "was compelled to write a philosophy while running for his life." Where a British or French premier could have laid his program before parliament and, if defeated, appealed to the country, Mr. Hoover had to act in isolation, without a popular mandate or means of obtaining one.

The President was not a great political thinker, but his principles can be discovered in the dynamics of his action; he was slow to start because he believed in letting established forces alone as long as possible; he resisted change because he knew that America is not essentially a revolutionary country and hoped that the interaction of radical and reactionary principles would create a smooth compromise. He was a believer in institutions and would not scrap one which was working badly, to establish a new one, because the interval between the end of the old and the perfection of the new could leave us without directing force. Against the wild men of Congress he was a rock; but he was also a rock against the sane men when they did not share his principles.

The low point of the depression, Mr. Seldes thinks, was from the end of 1931 to midsummer of 1932—the period of deepening gloom over the demonstrated failure of the moratorium, of realization that general deflation was going on, of a new interest in fascism, and of the shock of Mr. Hoover's treatment of the bonus marchers at Washington. Then followed the presidential campaign, "conducted in an economic vacuum from which the can-

didates occasionally made a sortie to say something relevant." Reviewing, in a notable chapter, the career of "the great victim," Mr. Seldes again skilfully balances Mr. Hoover's strength and weakness. "The final judgment on Mr. Hoover," he writes, "does not depend on what he did, but on what capitalism in America does. If it recovers, it will owe more to Mr. Hoover than to any other man." His weakness, as Mr. Seldes sees it, was that the principles to which he doggedly clung did not fit the case, that the counsellors whom he summoned by battalions promised much and did little, and that the Congress which was elected in November, 1930, and which he would have had to deal with if he had called an early session, "represented dissatisfaction with his policies." Temperamentally he was irritable; "he was psychologically stupid"; he ignored what was



GILBERT SELDES.

"annoying or hostile"; "he had no capacity for speaking the public mind, none of reading the public thought, none for giving the public consolation or courage." "He had no eloquence; he made promises of small things to happen in a short time, but never suggested what the promise of American life meant to him and could mean to the American people. Perhaps he was as confused as the rest."

What, one is moved to ask, is Mr. Seldes's conception of "the promise of American life" which Mr. Hoover was never moved to suggest? He writes graphically of the failing strength of business in the fall of 1931, of the "deflation of moral values," and of mental values in criticisms of education, of the business individualism championed by the Supreme Court in the Oklahoma ice case, of the significance of the Dearborn riots and the farmers' strikes, of the futility of a Protestantism inextricably bound up with the years of boom, and of the ineptitude of Congress. It seems to him less important that a few good writers have turned Communist than that "a great number of excellent writers have obviously begun to feel a certain insignificance in their work," and he does not, apparently, expect much of socialism. When he comes to look at the future, however, he sees only a danger that capitalism, and with it American society, may collapse. The fundamental characteristic of capitalism, he points out, is "trust and hope in the future," and the symbol of capitalism is money, but trust and hope have not returned, and money has become "flighty." No crowds of unemployed have as yet sought to wreck machines, "but the civilization based on the machine can be wrecked just as surely if confidence in the future of the machine is destroyed." Mr. Seldes closes his brilliant study without answering any of the grave questions which he raises. Is it possible that at this point he is, like Mr. Hoover, "as confused as the rest"?

Courteous Reader

(Continued from preceding page)

Thither, thou know'st the World is best inclin'd
Where luring Parnass most its Sweet imparts,
And Truth convey'd in Verse of gentle Kind,
To read perhaps will move the dullest Hearts:

So We, if Children young diseases'd we find,
Anoint with Sweets the Vessel's foremost Parts
To make them taste the Potions sharp we give;
They drink deceiv'd, and so deceiv'd they live.

The dullest, you see, are worth saving; and the poet's function is comparable to that of the physician, who lures the patient to drink—and live.

But these are deserted heights of "Parnass," on which the school of Miss Riding has no desire to exist. She prefers to remain "at home," receiving her friends. One can but wonder how many guests there are. I remember to have heard the depressing story of a little girl who longed to give a party. All was made ready, sweetmeats prepared, the house decked out for a festive occasion, and the child gaily attired to meet her guests. But nobody came. The little girl, like Miss Riding, was "at home," and there the affair ended.

The notion that an author may preserve his "integrity as a host" is nonsense. A poet, like other writers, solicits a hearing, and the act of solicitation cannot be accomplished without a certain gesture towards the public. Touch print, and you will be, in some sense, defiled. For you, privacy and the cool charms of obscurity are gone. You have descended into the market place, and plead to be attended to. Between an orator on a soapbox shouting to the passerby, and a poet shyly proffering a slender volume of verse there is no essential difference in kind. Both insist upon being heard.

The Oriental story-teller, surrounded by a group of auditors ready to pay for their entertainment, is one of the enduring examples of poetic activity. Both poet and storyteller have wares for sale, and both of them profess to provide something worthy of attention—entertainment or instruction,—something, moreover, that shall, presumably, be of more value than the hearer's uninterrupted meditations. It is this that the poet has been offering to do ever since the bard in the "Beowulf" struck his lyre (if he had one), and cried "Hwaet!" to attract the attention of his listeners. The whole tradition of literature is in startling contrast to the modern contempt for the public. Hamlet, it may be recalled, knew that some of a dramatist's fine strokes were caviare to the general, but he was not above making verses for a play himself. But when Mr. MacLeish assumes the role of Hamlet today (in his "Hamlet of A. MacLeish"), he expresses a very different attitude to the public. In his bitter musings he comes to feel that to write poetry is to

shout

For hearing in the world's thick dirty ear.

There is, of course, no specific charge against readers today; but the notion seems to be that they are somehow representative of a great unwashed democracy, with mob-emotions. They have itching if not dirty ears. At other times they are held to be, for one purpose or another, mid-Victorian, sentimental, conventional, orthodox, lovers of Longfellow and tameness, and (often) a college professor.

Now it would seem to be logical, if the poets thus despise their readers, for them to keep silence. And thus, indeed, does the poet just quoted reason with himself:

O shame, for shame to suffer it, to make
A skill of harm, a business of despair,
And like a barking ape, betray us all
For itch of notice.

O be still, be still,
Be dumb, be silent only. Seal your mouth.

Yes, there is a sad and golden dignity about silence, but it lets the whole cause of poetry go by default. A Milton that is mute is a Milton that is inglorious. It is the lot of a poet to break silence, to make a spectacle of himself, to unpack his heart with words, to insist upon telling his grief or his grievance, his joy, disillusion, hope, fear,—what not. Poets are under the goad of the Muses. It is at once their glory and their shame.

It is often the poets' notion—and it is defensible enough—that the passion they

utter is so sacredly intimate and so intensely personal that its criticism by individuals and its commendation by the public are very nearly an impertinence. It is true that in much of the world's finest poetry the note is so poignantly intimate that the reader feels almost as if he had his ear to the confessional screen. Nevertheless in his most piercing intimacies the poet cannot wholly forget that his art is essentially one of communication, or he will abandon language altogether and utter only inarticulate cries. And inarticulate passion is not poetry, but only its rough material. It is because of this that the poets have so often insisted that the emotion expressed in verse has somehow been altered since it was first experienced. It has suffered a sea-change into something rich and strange. It has passed through a crucible, been recollected in tranquillity, become "universalized" so that it is emblematic of the experience of many men, not merely of that of the poet alone.

The modern confusion in the reader's mind is paralleled in the bewildering disorder and rival claims of the poetic world itself. No historian of English poetry can feel any particular confidence as he attempts to record for posterity the state of things today. Schools have, of course, disappeared. It is not likely that poets intent on being as vividly personal as possible will ally themselves with any "Movement" or submit to the charge of following and (perhaps) imitating a Master. The very thing against which they contend is the authority of schools and movements and masters. But the freedom which they so ardently desire must be bought with a price, and the price is the shifting sand on which all poetic reputations today may be said to repose. Where will all these reputations be a half a century from now?

It is instructive to turn back for a moment and contrast the order and confidence of the late-Victorian world. I select a single and a homely example of what was thought of contemporary English



SWINBURNE, ONE OF CRANE'S CHIEF POETS, FROM A CARICATURE BY MAX BEERBOHM.

poetry exactly half a century ago. It was in 1882 that Mr. Kegan Paul put forth an anthology of verse entitled, "Living English Poets." It was, if I am not mistaken, edited by the youthful Canon Beeching, and it was furnished with a frontispiece in black and white drawn by Walter Crane in his happiest manner. It represented the slopes of Parnassus on which, in various attitudes, were represented the five chief poets of England who were still alive and active: Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Swinburne, and Morris. The anthology contained, very properly, examples of the work of minor poets also: Miss Rossetti, Patmore, Newman, William Barnes, Austin Dobson, and others. The list was intentionally inclusive, but none of the names, except perhaps that of Sir Henry Taylor, is wholly forgotten or negligible today. The pleasant little volume represented a community of interests existing among poets, critics, publishers, and readers. The frontispiece is, however, more significant of the steadiness of critical opinion in the eighties than the contents of the volume. For Mr. Crane's five poets.

Why Souls Are Hidden

By JOHN RUSSELL MCCARTHY

WHO unveils his soul to the world
Is as a woman uncovering for a lover.

The mist of the spirit gone—
The silk of the body thrown back—
Defenseless, defenseless.

The body, soft and open and pitiful,
Seized, pierced, crushed, thrown aside.

The spirit, quivering naked and sensitive,
Tossed from hand to hand
Until it falls.

But the woman, though weeping, is pregnant,
While the soul is dead.