

The Saturday Review of Literature

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The Saturday Review in An Age of Experiment

The ten years since *The Saturday Review* was founded have approximated the era of the so-called "lost generation" of American writers. But what an irony of misnaming that the term "lost" should have been applied to the youth of the one great Western country that did not lose its young in the war, but kept its oncoming generation, disillusioned, discontented, yet able to propagate both their own successors and a new literature! And indeed these ten years which the *Review* and the war generation have lived together, have been rich not sterile, creative not decadent, a decade in which it was good for a literary journal to be alive.

1924-1934 saw Dreiser recognized, Sinclair Lewis come to the peak of his achievement, Robert Frost and Willa Cather round into maturity, Elinor Wylie

a fiction of the proletariat, and the groundwork of a Marxian critique of American literature. It witnessed the end of prudishness, Eliot and the intellectualists, the creation of *The New Yorker* our first adequate magazine of satiric humor, the founding of *Fortune* which represents the first efficient use of the methods of scholarship in journalism, a new literature of economics and a new literature of psychology. It saw the revival of biography for popular reading, and history, with science behind it, made again into an art. The American generation that became of age in these fertile years may have been confused but was certainly not lost.

Still more significant in this decade have been the new forces released and stirring. It has been a period of equinocial, the intellectual climate of which has changed from storm to storm; indeed its marked characteristics have been a sense of change in the air, a wide restlessness, and a reawakening of spiritual energy long drugged by great expectations of profits and an overweening confidence in American materialism.

The writer responsible for most of the weekly editorials in the *Review* for these ten years, looking back over his contributions, feels like a recording barometer suddenly become conscious of the surprising dips and rises its pen has marked. With surprise, but not with shame, he notes false starts, mistaken interpretations, tentative prophecies not realized. The infallible factotums of literary criticism in earlier days have one by one been exposed by a more scientific scholarship. Their omniscience has been proved hollow, their dogmatic interpretations of their own times, which for a while deceived history, have too many of them been exploded. It is better to have been consistent in reaching after elusive truth, than to have attained, as many of them did, a magnificent consistency of error. Nevertheless this *Review's* ten years of judgment exercised by editors and contributors working together has not been without its own consistency. It will be clear to the reader looking backward that our barometer has

not failed in sensitivity to important currents in the literary life of these interesting years. We have believed that change is a vital element of literature. We have welcomed change whose roots were nourished in a rich and authentic past. We have been aware that change may be from better to worse as easily as from worse to better, but must be accepted (like the universe), yet need not be approved simply because it is change.

Any attempt to sum up in advance of history what has most significantly changed in literature, and especially in American literature, in this decade, can be only a guess. We guess then, that what happened in 1924-1934, was that our writers then prevaillingly turned their gaze from a fascinated contemplation of their own emotions, and, startled by the shock of the war, and the boom, and the depression, began to look out and around and beyond themselves with a nervous resolve to see more clearly. They gave up and indeed forgot those agreeable phantasies of what life should be like which the decades before 1914 had supplied so abundantly, and began to turn a thousand sharp-lensed kodaks on society regarded, really for the first time in America, as a complicated structure governed by scientific laws of cause and effect. They saw discontent where their predecessors (and their softer contemporaries) romanticized, they found disillusion in communities hitherto depicted as quaintly sentimental, they discovered tares in the wheat and bad in pretty much everything. In order to philosophize their revolt, they took to abstractions and formulas. The young novelists worked out their perspectives with the aid of principles acquired from Marx and used or misused to make a pattern. The new poets borrowed the physicists' habit of representing the symbolism of natural objects by a formula, and wrote their poetry accordingly. The new journalists, who in this decade became dramatists, novelists, or critics as easily as caterpillars turn into

which was now their master. The new playwrights turned to the movies, developing there a speed of story-telling which resembled the new tempo of transportation which carried them from New York to Hollywood in the time of reading an old-fashioned novel. The serious-minded (which means, most, even of the flippant) who wished to make social history out of literature, became excitedly conscious of the rise of a new class, and wrote books about their discoveries in a sub-civilization, which the proletariat, obstinately un-literary, never thought of reading. Satire, coming to its own, became an American style, instead of a trick permitted only to irresponsibles like Mark Twain or Mr. Dooley. Since "looking them over" was the literary fashion it was sure to prosper, and so was biography, for when contemporary life began to be more closely scrutinized it was inevitable that we should have to revalue the celebrities of the past. Literature in America became objective at the moment when Proust and Joyce abroad were carrying it inward, yet the difference was chiefly between an interest in the class in contrast to the analysis of an individual. Yet all the while that the new school was thus experimenting, the great craftsmen (now passing middle age) of the period, were quietly perfecting a summary of what America had been up to the present, and still largely was, in spite of swift change on the horizon. Booth Tarkington had probably done his best work, but Willa Cather, Robert Frost, Ellen Glasgow, E. A. Robinson, and others, were in their prime.

This last was absolute gain for letters; just as the experimenting of the Hemingways, Faulkners, MacLeishes, et al., was potential gain, especially in their frank realism, their vigorous diction (in which Ezra Pound had a hand), their freedom from literary convention, and their escape from that part of tradition which had grown stale. Tradition, for the moment, went underground, regretted by the reading public which had a pardonable liking for books that they could understand about lives that appealed to them. But

the strong current of tradition keeps its power even when it runs in a conduit instead of on visible wires. It will be tapped again.

So much for gains, but there were losses, —losses in dignity; in sheer interest of reading; in subject matter, for the characters which interested the strongest of the new writers seem to have been limited to the maladjusted, the discordant, and the defeated, of which it is true the first especially had been much neglected before. One loss in particular seems to us to be in its way the distinguishing feature of the negative side of the whole performance.

Something happened in '24-'34 to the inner life of the younger American writers. Leaving out of the list a few conspicuous exceptions, it would seem that they had none. There is plenty of ego, but no confidence of inner living in the new writers of this decade. They write like sensitive typewriters operated by forces outside themselves. They are sometimes intensely subjective, but find nothing inwards that does not shock, or confuse, or distress them. They have no standards, no faith, no certainties, and this after the war and the depression is natural, but also no faculty of resting upon an inner confidence in their own existence as a soul and mind alive, reflective, philosophical against fate, and capable of pleasure in being and thinking in despite of circumstance. They have a fierce passion for experience, but naturally no joy in life. Is it the vast confusion they discovered when they began to look beneath the forms of established society that thus cancelled their own sense of personality?

To the Editor: *An Irish Scholar; What Burke Meant*

Michael Monahan

SIR:—It has often entertained me to speculate about the periods in history in

Or was it a confusion in their own emotions which led them to drop their own "I am" in the attempt to analyze the woes of the classes? One does not know, but the fact is evident, and if this generation was "lost," this is what it was losing. Confidence. Not confidence in a social structure, or in a revealed God, or in leadership, each of which has often been lost, and must be lost in order that a new confidence may follow. But confidence in the possibilities of the state of being a man. Certainly that inner life so manifest in the leaders of the last age of intellectual revolt in America—in Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, Whitman—is woefully absent in the new American literature, and this is what makes the daring exploits in new areas of the human consciousness so frequent in these new books seem often harsh and unlovely, brittle and unreasoned. For if it is hard to write regularly and consciously for two million magazine readers without acquiring a standardized imagination, it is even harder to depict truly and sympathetically and prophetically the life of others without a rich, vivid, and confident inner life of your own.

Such a shrinking and such an aridity of the inner life of the imaginative artist in words, such a rich and varied and pugnacious assault in new realms of social experience and human nature, such a crashing down of inhibitions, such a release of active intellects afraid of nothing that happens so long as it is human, it has been the privilege of this *Review* to witness and record and comment upon, with what wisdom has been vouchsafed to it, in the age of literary experiment, the decade 1924-1934.

onies. In his argument he considered the policies proposed by others. One was that of prosecution under the criminal law of England. To this Burke objected as a

writer and editor of note, and of whom a bust by Edward A. Minazzoli is to be presented this week to the library in New Canaan, Conn.

Michael Monahan was that rare personage amongst us today—the positive man: he refused to be negative and non-committal; in the opinions he held there were no shadings nor shiftings; he swung between the poles of enthusiasm and scorn. I always decided that Michael would have been most at home in medieval Europe—the Europe of clerks and scholars. He believed that that Europe was correctly pictured in "A Yankee at the Court of King Arthur," and praise of the thirteenth century always seemed to him the emptiest claptrap. Nevertheless, his true kinsmen were the scholars and poets who went from university to university, lecturing in Latin, disputing in Latin, drinking in taverns, men of great erudition and manifold enmities, but with, as a core to it all, a real belief in and love for Christ and a devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Yes, Michael was of that goliardic brotherhood, one of these footloose Irish scholars whom a Church Father denounced as "porridge-eating, pot-bellied, pugnacious Scots."

Twenty hours before his death I was with him: he was tired, but he roused himself from time to time and spoke with an enthusiasm so subdued that it was pathetic when I thought of his old-time gusto, and with what was for him a sort of impersonalness. I think that only a part of him was fully conscious, the part of him that loved and venerated a few men. He spoke of Dickens, of Thomas Moore, most memorably about Horace.

Then when he lay back tired, sinking into a doze as soon as I turned away, I thought "This is the real Michael Monahan, this man of strong affection, this devotee of character and creativeness."

PADRAIC COLUM.

New York City.

Indicting a Nation

SIR:—For a prominent place among ordinary misquotations, familiar to reviewers, I nominate "You cannot indict a whole nation." In the first place, Burke didn't say it; secondly, he didn't mean by it what he is presumed to have meant; thirdly, if he had, it wouldn't have been true.

Burke was arguing for a certain policy toward the insubordinate American col-

was to consist in the regularity of its form; and Burke objects that for the present case no such customary and regular form exists. The question is one of forms of procedure under the English common law, and the answer is irrelevant to procedure in the republic of letters.

The words, altered so as to destroy their specific appropriateness to Burke's purpose, are quoted as if they meant "you cannot denounce a nation as such." But you can; everybody does. Read the Hebrew prophets; if you haven't time just now for the whole, read the first two chapters of Amos. See what the little nations of Greece said of each other in Thucydides. Get Polybius's candid opinion of the Cretans or the Ætolians. See what Burke himself, two dozen years later in his life, said of the doings of the French people at that time. . . .

Of course there can also be unjust accusations against a nation. But that ought to be another story.

STEPHEN T. BYINGTON.

Ballard Vale, Mass.

Poets and Practical Men

SIR:—Mr. James Stephens's remark under his picture in the issue of the *Review* for September 15 seems to me all wrong. What would be pertinent might be phrased thus: "The poets and artists must take hold of the world; it has been run too long by 'practical' men."

CARL P. ROLLINS.

New Haven, Conn.

A Lee Bibliography

SIR:—Some of your readers may be interested to know that a complete bibliography of printed books and articles on General Robert Edward Lee, and also a census of Lee manuscripts in the hands of libraries and collectors, is being compiled at the library of Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. The project has been under way for more than two years and definite progress has now been made. Correspondence and suggestions looking to the uncovering of obscure material is cordially invited by Washington and Lee Library.

BLANCHE PRICHARD McCORM, Librarian.
Washington and Lee University,
Lexington, Va.

Twenty-Six Estimates of Our First Ten Years

Letters from Prominent Literary Figures, Here and Abroad,
on the Occasion of The Saturday Review's Tenth Anniversary

THE tenth birthday of a magazine may (in America today) be regarded as indicating an age old enough for retrospection, young enough to take advice. On the occasion of our tenth anniversary, the Editors of The Saturday Review asked those who cared to write letters to be free in their criticism, while not allowing undue reticence to interfere with any expression of approval of the policy and achievement of The Saturday Review. We wish to express our thanks, not only for the kind words, but also for the suggestions and for the criticism in general. We have a policy, a program, and a past, but also a future in which constructive criticism as well as friendly support will be valued and valuable.

"Character, Tact, and Acuteness"

SIR:—It was with lively interest that I learned that *The Saturday Review* was about to celebrate its tenth anniversary, and I hasten to send my most heartfelt congratulations on the event and best wishes for the future. Each time that I have had occasion to read this noted weekly, I have come away with the impression that, thanks to an editorial direction of exceptional ability and breadth of view, it takes rank not only with the outstanding literary organs of America, but with the leading reviews of the world. At this time of intellectual perplexities and confusion it is America itself which one must congratulate on a periodical which follows and interprets literary events with so much character, tact, and acuteness. From the bottom of my heart I hope that the decade on which it is now entering will see its task, never more difficult than today, as well fulfilled as the last, and that it will meet then as now with the acclaim and success it deserves.

THOMAS MANN.

Küssnacht-Zürich.

"Material for Literary History"

SIR:—My feeling is that a future historian who might wish to review the literary life of the decade just past would find virtually all the needed material in the files of *The Saturday Review* for this period. That is to say, these files constitute a most important historical document; the historian would find in them, not only the literary feeling and opinion of their time, but also the very life itself of their day.

This life, moreover, would not be a local one, but, on the contrary, cosmopolitan; for the field covered would be of universal extent. In other words, the historian just imagined would here find considered virtually all that has been considered in the books of this period and would thus have before him, condensed, the decade's essential human thought so far as it is in the power of print to express it.

BOOTH TARKINGTON.

Kennebunkport, Maine.

"No Labor-Saving Mental Devices"

SIR:—I have read, I think, every issue of *The Saturday Review* since it began with Dr. Canby as editor. At the end of each week I have looked for my copy with pleasure, and turning immediately to the editorials, I have been seldom disappointed. Dr. Canby's commentary on the age has been filled with sound sense and sharply pointed with insight.

The general tone of *The Review* is tolerant, judicious, and hospitable to a diversity of opinion. Among the more important contributions, I put first the essays by Santayana, one of the great philosophers of all time, and the most distinguished living master of English prose. Other articles I enjoyed were by Harold Nicolson, James Truslow Adams, Archibald MacLeish, H. M. Tomlinson, J.

Donald Adams, John Chamberlain, Allan Nevins, Horace Gregory, and of course Christopher Morley.

But what I like best in *The Saturday Review* is its loyalty to the republic of letters through a period of riot without revolution, when everything except writing is supposed to be literature. For it appears that every branch of art nowadays has become, as Virginia Woolf once remarked of the art of fiction, "infinitely accommodating." So accommodating, indeed, that to hold any standards at all about anything in the world is the quickest way to attract disaster in criticism. That *The Review* should have held standards and still survived proves both its vitality and its usefulness. As long as we continue to live in an age of the amateur, and mediocrity, if only it does not modulate its voice, is assured of an audience, it will be adequate praise of any literary journal to say that it has never offered its readers the cheap modern substitutes for the effort of thinking, or employed a single one of the various labor-saving mental devices.

ELLEN GLASGOW.

Richmond, Va.

Would Like Unsigned Reviews

SIR:—The best weekly journal of literary criticism in English that I ever saw was the *Athenæum*, as it existed in England before the war. (In its later form after the war, it was a caricature of its former self.)

The *Athenæum* which lasted through most of the nineteenth century, was authoritative, dignified, yet never dull.

The Literary (Weekly) Supplement of the *London Times* at present is better than anything we have in America; though it leaves much to be desired.

I am forced to the conclusion that a literary journal consisting largely of book reviews, gains in influence and in value if all the reviews are unsigned. The reviewer himself is free to give a frank opinion and is also not so eager to show off his own brilliant wit; for perhaps a majority of book reviews in America are attempts on the part of the reviewer to ape Jack Horner.

Furthermore, the journal itself gains in influence because it is quoted for itself and not because of a particular reviewer. *The Saturday Review of Literature* says, etc.

I congratulate you on what you have accomplished with *The Saturday Review*; in every issue there are things not only worth reading but worth preserving. I think, however, it should be literary and not colloquial in tone. No one loves slang in intimate talk more than I do; but I think it is quite possible for literary articles to be both vigorous and interesting even when written in good English.

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS.

New Haven, Conn.

"The American View We Desire"

SIR:—Your *Review of Literature* has one fault, there is not enough of it. It is very welcome on this side, as far as it goes. What I enjoy most in it are its editorials, its special articles, its correspondence, and its advertisements. They give the American view we desire. In its broad survey of literature and the tendencies of modern opinion, it measures by reference to the established bearings those traditional values which have survived ages of earthquakes and revolutions. I have no confidence in those who can tell us by happy guesswork where we are, without resource to those obsolete data, the meridian and the horizon.

As to reviewing, on your side as on this it has fallen to a level where nobody who knows the tradition would expect to find good work. There is plenty of knowledge,

and confidence which is near to bump-tiousness, but little understanding. We never listen for the sound of Apollo's bowstring today. Usually a modern review makes a noise more like a dropped tea-tray; no need to look to see whether a shaft has hit the gold. Anarchy is doing its worst with literature as it is with politics. Still, the reviewing in the *S R* of *L* compares easily with the best on this side. It has good humor and sobriety, virtues growing as out-of-date as reason itself. The revolt against civilization is growing more and more violent, so, my dear Canby, you have got your work cut out. Hold on!

H. M. TOMLINSON.

Croydon, England.

"Sincerity Never Questioned"

SIR:—I congratulate you warmly on the tenth anniversary of *The Saturday Review*. In it you have made a fine contribution to our journalism. An independent literary weekly in America was certainly greatly needed; and you have created it and demonstrated its ability to survive these most difficult times without currying favor of the publishers by, for example, suppressing unfavorable reviews. *The Saturday Review* is both liberal and catholic in its taste; nor is it doctrinaire. It is a good deal to create nowadays in this field a journal whose honesty and sincerity have never been questioned, and you and your associates may well take pride in the achievement. I wish for it another equally successful ten years,—with a sharpening of its editorial pencil as the years lapse.

OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD.

Thomaston, Conn.

"Vacillates Between Gossip and Controversies"

SIR:—I can't pass judgment on the way *The Saturday Review* has reflected the literary life of the past decade in the sense of being able to refer back to specific controversies and deciding how *The Review* has met them. It has not had that value for me. I have read it for its occasional pieces, longer, more exact, and more scholarly than those of the book sections of the newspapers—reviews which sometimes, as in the case of Hook's piece on modern socialism, Josephson's on Dos Passos, several of Chamberlain's, gave you a feeling that a specific literary question was being examined as a whole, and being really clarified as a result. Reviews of this character, actually critical essays, have been the most distinguished contribution of *The Review*, and in presenting them it has performed a service no other American publication could offer.

But I have been increasingly conscious of a sense of impatience and disappointment at a kind of editorial extravagance in the magazine, at the waste of so much precious space on wearily-whimsical columns, photographs, bookstore gossip, at a

time when so many critical problems are knocking at our doors. *The Review* has seemed to vacillate between being a forum for critical controversies and a vehicle for literary gossip—and not sharp, provocative gossip, of the sort that's really tied to the dominant cultural movements of the present and in which the New York literary world abounds, but incidental, irrelevant, and generally gentle stuff. When I think that *The Saturday Review* is the only specifically critical weekly in the country, it seems to me that it falls far short of its opportunities, no matter what point of view it expresses. It has little prestige with the writers of my generation, I think because they draw back from its blank spots rather than because they consider it too conservative or too liberal—a strong and consistent and well-integrated opposition would stimulate them to reply, would force them constantly to examine the bases of their convictions.

ROBERT CANTWELL.

Carmel, Cal.

"Chronicle of the Literary Scene"

SIR:—It would be quite impossible for me to visualize the literary scenery of the past decade without *The Saturday Review of Literature*. Other American reviews have devoted themselves to sheer reviewing with no general comment or they have carried book reviews only as news. With still others, reviews have frequently been merely a sideline department in small print, a sop to readers, who, supposedly interested in the various social phenomena of their own times, might also be expected to take a cursory glance at contemporary literature. American reviewing has suffered by consequence from a too journalistic and newsy appeal, from a confusing eclecticism or, in the opposite direction, from a too stringent professional or propagandist approach. The general shuffling about of reviewers from one organ of opinion to another has also by no means tended to clarify, although it has sometimes helped to enliven the scene. To most of this *The Saturday Review of Literature* has been a valuable exception.

As far as I know it has been the only publication in the United States which provided a justly moulded "matrix" into which the current comment on contemporary literature in the form of reviews, articles, letters from readers, and other brief topical matter could be freely poured and yet still remain contained in surroundings that have always been—at least—an intelligent reminder and assertion of literature as a living continuum.

This "matrix," provided by the editorials, the reviews, the articles, and the comments of the permanent staff, has to a surprising degree successfully graphed the tide of thought of the past decade. Not always brilliant, the content of the magazine has seldom been dull and there have

(Continued on page 180)



"HAVE YOU SOMETHING NICE IN TIN FOR A MAGAZINE?"