



Books and Mass Psychology

CROWD psychologists, from Le Bon to Ortega y Gasset, have impressed upon us that people behave less intelligently in the mass than they do as individuals. They will be swayed in crowds by emotions which, if alone, they will recognize as cheap and unworthy. This is common knowledge.

Out of the discoveries of the crowd psychologists there has arisen the concept of the mass-man—the man whose behavior is always on the mass level, the victim of demagogues, the unit of aggressive majorities. Following the lead of Ortega, such writers as Ralph Adams Cram, and more recently Albert Jay Nock (whose contribution, in a slightly mock-serious vein, appeared in a recent *Atlantic Monthly*) have formulated the hypothesis that the mass-man is actually a lower form of evolution that *homo sapiens*, and they are demanding that the anthropologists describe and classify the mass-man as the missing link.

On the other side, propagandists from the left assure us that individualism is dead, in all of its manifestations from the "rugged" individualism of commerce to the ivory tower of art. The only chance for salvation, in their view, is to become a unit in the mass. It is a very dreary outlook.

Or rather it would be, if we accepted these theories at their face value. But the concept of the mass-man is one that is likely to run away with the popular essayist, who forgets that he is dealing with a concept and not a reality. The fact is, as the best of the crowd-psychologists are careful to point out, that everybody is part mass-man and part individual in varying proportions. With some, the resistance to mass pressure breaks down more easily than with others.

Suppose that, say, two hundred average men spend the afternoon reading in a public library. They will choose a wide variety of books to read, they will derive widely differing benefits or pleasures from reading them. They will depart in orderly fashion, and you will not

know, unless you ask them, what their opinions are of the books they have been reading.

Now suppose that later in the evening these two hundred men go to the movies. When the news-reel is shown, you will be able to observe some mass behavior. President Roosevelt's image will be greeted with applause, except by a few intrepid souls who will hiss; Hitler's by hissing, except for a possible few who will applaud. In some neighborhoods, a controversial figure in a news-reel, Coughlin or Long for instance, can charge the atmosphere to the point where every one in the audience feels it.

This direct power is one that books can seldom exert. Reading a book is a private affair, and a man reading a book is by the nature of the case a man acting as an individual. This is a highly suggestive fact, and may contribute to the explanation of many things: for one, why there are not more books read and sold; for another, why many really influential books make their influence felt slowly and over a long period of time. And conversely, it suggests that books do not provide the best medium for mass propaganda, under the name of "proletarian" or any other.

The Snows of Yesteryear

The ephemeral nature of popularity was never better illustrated than in the exhibition of "New York in Fiction" now open to the public in the Museum of the City of New York. Here, gathered together with novels of less circulation, are some of the best-sellers of bygone years. Alas, for the vanity of authors! Who except the curious student of literature ever looks into them today? Susannah Rowson's "Charlotte," for instance, believed to be the first book having the City of New York for its setting and said to have sold more than any American novel not excluding "Uncle Tom's Cabin,"—is there one out of every thousand of avid readers of fiction who has ever even heard its name? And how many of the far greater number who know the title of Ann S. Stephens's "Ma-laeska or the Indian Wife of the White Hunter," the first dime novel with New York for background, ever looked inside its covers?

What makes for this subsidence of a novel's popularity, for the complete evaporation of the reputation of authors who once counted their readers in numbers in every hamlet of the country? In the first instance, we should say, a shift in public taste which outmodes manner or subject matter, and leaves what to one period seemed pertinent or revolutionary to another old-fashioned or stale. And in the second, the fact that the wide public which makes a best-seller does not demand outstanding literary quality in the books it takes to its heart. Which latter reason is, of course, part and parcel of the first. For supreme genius, even great

talent, can transcend hour and theme, and by lifting its material to the plane of the universal invest it with interest for all time. A cross-section of popular literary history such as the exhibition of the Museum of the City of New York presents, only throws into relief once more the fact that between facility and distinction yawns a gap which time, taking no reck of momentary cloaking circumstances, remorselessly reveals.

Books and the War

War books, like many other commodities, are subject to fashions, and to the law of supply and demand. While the war was in progress, the only war books people would read were those which sentimentalized and glorified the war. For a few years after the war, all war books were unpopular. Realism, coming from France in Barbusse's "Le Feu," eventually crossed the Atlantic; and from about 1923 we were getting such books as Dos Passos's "Three Soldiers" and Cummings's "The Enormous Room." From then on, the point of view in war books and plays has not essentially changed; "The Case of Sergeant Grischa," "A Farewell to Arms," "All Quiet on the Western Front," and "Journey's End" are unmistakably alike in condemning war; so was the picture book, "The First World War," and most recently of all, so is Humphrey Cobb's "Paths of Glory." It is encouraging that for over ten years this should have been the dominant point of view among imaginative writers on the war, and that it should have in so many cases met with overwhelming public response. We hope it really means what it seems to mean—that there are many thousands who either remember, or have learned from books, enough about the last war to put up a substantial opposition to the next.

Ten Years Ago

In the corresponding week of 1925, The Saturday Review did not recommend "This Mad Ideal," by Floyd Dell. Louis Kronenberger wrote in his review: "Far from carrying Floyd Dell beyond his achievement in 'Moon-Calf,' the latest of his novels is only a reworking of the old material . . . written from a formula."

Nor did The Saturday Review recommend "Supers and Supermen," by Philip Guedalla. "A very bad book," said M. R. Werner, well known biographer of Barnum and Brigham Young, in his review in the same issue.

Today

The Saturday Review does not recommend:

KNEEL TO THE RISING SUN. By Erskine Caldwell. See review on page 5.

YANKEE KOMISAR. By S. M. Riis with Arthur J. Burks. See review on page 12.

Letters to the Editor: *Princeton Seniors and "If"; Are Young Writers Defeatist?*

Kipling at Princeton

SIR:—I had occasion today to make a rapid journey to Princeton. I hadn't seen it for exactly twenty-five years. I had almost forgotten how beautiful it is. . . .

In the Princeton library I found a shelf of duplicate volumes for sale at 50c apiece. I found (and bought) a copy of Kipling's *Verse* (Inclusive Edition, 1885-1918). You (or F. P. A. will do it for you) will recall that "If" has been the favorite poem of Princeton seniors for a good many years. Here are the facts: The duplicate copy was worn to shreds. The bookmark was at page 250: "When Earth's Last Picture Is Painted." "If" was one of the 28 poems checked in its index, but there were no tear-marks. The library slip in the back bore the following three dates—the slow finish of a Princeton Kipling:

Sep 29 '33

Feb 27 '34

Mar 27 '34

DAVID MCCORD.

Princeton, N. J.

Talents of Youth

SIR:—In response to your editorial query about young writers of today I'm moved to reply, in spite of the tricky complexity of the subject, that they are in general not defeatist. I'm using as a basis for my opinions the half dozen college students of definite writing ability who have come under my tutelage. I have no sentimental illusions about the younger generation. Their self-importance and frank contempt for their elders are often intolerably galling to me. But they seem to me to have an honesty and simplicity which give them a singularly direct approach to reality. As far as it is possible for man to depart from illusion they have gone, and yet they have a vitality and ardor which keep them definitely out of the defeatist rank.

The Victorians were feverishly engaged in proving to themselves and to the world, by dint of much rationalization, that life has a pattern. Many of the moderns have been energetically engaged in proving that it hasn't. And now the more thoughtful of our youngsters are so much interested in the thing-in-itself that they don't worry about such things as Divine Justice (the Victorian theologian's answer to the skeptic) or the sordid chaos so popular in the literature of the past fifteen years. Of course there's a pattern, they would probably say if forced into abstractions, although it's frequently the fascinating design of an artist gone psychopathic.

Something both salutary and terrifying happens when a teacher relaxes into purple patches or too facile generalization. The unclouded gaze of the students who think for themselves betrays an ill-concealed impatience, which does more to eliminate sloppy teaching than an army of visiting trustees could do.

Young writers today are quite as alive to profound truths as their seniors although they are more inclined to write of those truths in concrete terms. Some-



"MY WIFE CAN DO 6,000 WORDS A DAY—BUT NOT ON A TYPEWRITER."

times they're guilty of immature violence and of mistaking melodrama for drama, but for the most part their creative activities are remarkably free from platitude and defeatism. I wonder what these young people will do with their talents.

VIRGINIA ELLIOTT CAMPBELL.

Lewiston, Maine.

Dickens and "Israfil"

SIR:—There is another amusing "point" in Hervey Allen's "Israfil." On page 424 of the one-volume edition (p. 529 of the two-volume Doran edition of 1927) Mr. Allen visualizes the meeting of Poe and Dickens in a Philadelphia hotel in 1842. "Evidently the big-bearded man with the deep eyes, bright green necktie slipped through a diamond ring under the then unusual stiff linen collar, and a velvet vest with a gold chain and cameo dangling across it, found the young man with the olive complexion . . . an interesting person."

But in 1842 Dickens was only thirty, and all his hair was on his head at that period of his life, as the Maclise portrait (reproduced in "Israfil") shows.

New York City. EARLE WALBRIDGE.

"The Eighth Sin"

SIR:—The undersigned is compiling a census of known copies of Christopher Morley's book, "The Eighth Sin." This material, with historical data, will receive publication as soon as the results of the search appear to justify. Will owners of the book, or those who know where copies exist, kindly write, stating if the books contain author's inscription?

ALFRED P. LEE.

235 So. 15th Street,
Philadelphia, Pa.

The Facts in "Paths of Glory"

SIR:—It should scarcely be necessary to defend a work of fiction on the ground that it is true to fact. But since Captain Cohn has raised the question of truth in his review of "Paths of Glory," we ask *The Saturday Review*, in fairness to the author, to point out the authorities cited at the end of the book, which Captain Cohn apparently overlooked:—

All the characters, units, and places mentioned in this book are fictitious.

However, if the reader asks, "Did such things really happen?" the author answers, "Yes," and refers him to the following sources which suggested the story: *Les crimes des conseils de guerre*, by R.-G. Réau; *Les fusillés pour l'exemple*, by J. Galtier-Boissière and Daniel de Ferdon; *Les dessous de la guerre révélés par les comités secrets* and *Images secrètes de la guerre*, by Paul Allard; a special dispatch to *The New York Times* of July 2, 1934, which appeared under this headline: "FRENCH ACQUIT 5 SHOT FOR MUTINY IN 1915; WIDOWS OF TWO WIN AWARDS OF 7 CENTS EACH"; and *Le fusillé* by Blanche Maupas, one of the widows who obtained exoneration of her husband's memory and who was awarded damages of one franc.

As to Captain Cohn's remark, "It is perfectly known that the same incident occurred in all armies"—the following figures may be of interest.

Death sentences by court martial followed by execution during the war:

In the French Army—1,637.

In the U. S. Army—None (for military offenses).

MARSHALL A. BEST

The Viking Press, Inc.,
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