



Safety for Poets

IN New York last week a Poetry Ball drew some thousands to watch a pageant, to dance, eat, talk, and contribute to an endowment fund for established poets. In the Renaissance the prince gave a purse of ducats. In the machine age that heterogeneous group called Society pays its \$10.00 a ticket, the net to go to poetry. The first, as Shakespeare might have said, is the neater way, but what difference does it make provided the entertainment is good, and the returns ample? For poetry needs to be endowed.

This is no time, even if it were necessary, to argue the cause of poetry. It is a barren age for great poets, since the world's obsessions are with the mechanical adjustments of man to his environment, and yield with difficulty to poetic expression. The need is all the greater. It is deplorable that this generation has been so conditioned to prose that they can with difficulty understand a language so charged with emotional thinking that by necessity it takes on rhythmic form and the high suggestibility of words chosen for their connotation as well as their denotation. It is deplorable for the poets, too, who inevitably feel that they are speaking in a void, and so often talk to themselves in elliptical numbers rather than to their fellow men.

We leave this question aside, with the confident assertion that the vital need of more good poetry, more and better read, is easy to prove, if proof is necessary. It was for the poets primarily that the new Academy of Poetry, with its ball, was inaugurated.

Curious that the people who believe and know that scholarship or science needs security do not realize that security is a valuable gift for poets also. The relative safety of an academic job may breed timorousness, and even time-serving, but without it, disinterested investigation would largely cease. Work upon the atom, or the virus of cold in the head, or the vitamins, or the stars, requires, since scientists are human, an accompanying guarantee not of wealth, not even of fame,

but of reasonable economic security. Otherwise only the rich and the incredibly rash could devote the life-time of effort which even a tiny advance in human knowledge demands of the researcher. No state ever got more and better science by starving its scientists.

This seems axiomatic. Why not then apply the same reasoning to poetry? It is also a life-time effort, which must, as a rule, be begun in youth. It also is relatively non-productive of financial gain, sometimes entirely so. Only in those rare periods when poetry and the common interest were close have poets been able to earn enough to guarantee a reasonable security. The best men, with very, very few exceptions, have derived the backbone of their income from other sources, usually from inheritance or gift.

The poet is by definition not a steady man, not a thrifty bourgeois with his mind on profits. He must have had deep emotional experiences and ardent searchings of the mind or his poetry will be fluff or chaff. All the more does he need security. Not the security of easy money, not the security of a job. Not any security that binds him. Like the scientist who resembles him closely in that both must be concerned with the production not the sales value of their brains, he must know that if he does his work well, he can count on some safety from economic storm. He cannot be safe against the storms that sweep the mind and be a poet, but he must have security in his environment of home and friends, and food and shelter, or suffer, and his work with him. The law is inexorable. He is a man who profits by experience, even terrible experience, but he cannot profit from hardship and privation and worry indefinitely continuing. He will always have trouble enough. But he cannot do his best work if he is guaranteed trouble. Exile may have had its benefits for Dante, but waiting upon strangers' stairs was not one of the causes of his greatness. The Elizabethan poets who died in misery were the inferiors of Shakespeare whose economic safety, at least, was assured by his good fortune in being an actor as well as a playwright, and as a playwright a practitioner of what was then the only kind of poetry that could usually be exchanged for immediate cash.

Anything for Profits We should like to see a little more scholarship and a little less imaginative literature in some departments of American life, notably in the tabloids. The tabloids have their points, but they are not in the headlines. Our statistician has kept track of the figures in one black-face sheet since the Abyssinian war began. Since the Italians crossed the line, 50,217 Ethiopians have been killed in type by the headline writer. (The 17 was evidently due to an error by which the actual casualty figure of the text got up higher without an accrued zero.) Once Great Britain and Italy

have begun to fight. Once the war has been stopped by the Duce. We are told that another newspaper, pro-Ethiopian in sympathies, has rolled up a total of Italian dead from wounds or disease almost as impressive. Between them, when and if the real battles begin, they may sweep both armies into the casualty list by Christmas.

Now presumably the headline staffs of these papers went to school. Indeed, since the sensational press has always been a refuge for intellectuals, they probably went to college, and certainly some idea of the reasonable accuracy demanded by even elementary scholarship must have been given to them. They must know better. Probably they do, but are under pressure from a circulation manager trying to hold his job. What is truth when advertisers ask for coverage?

Abyssinia is far away, and the number of paper-slain Ethiopians not in itself important. Nevertheless this cynicism is the kind of insult to the human intelligence which makes enemies for the profit-making system among honest folks who feel that capitalism is still the best bet in economics. For this is a minor instance of the complacency with which the debauching of the minds of the public is condoned if only it pays. No other argument until recently has been intelligible to the proprietors of the movies. No other argument is taken seriously by the owners of more great newspaper properties than defenders of our present order will care to admit. It is a curious civilization we live in. Millions spent on the non-profit making business of educating children to use their minds like rational beings. Millions made by exploiting the instinctive tendencies of adults to revert to the category of credulous children who can be stuffed with vulgarity or with lies.

Ten Years Ago

Every year adds to the accretion of Napoleonic literature which already reaches an immense total. 1925 was no exception. Elie Faure's "Napoleon" was reviewed in The Saturday Review for February 28th, 1925, by Wilbur Cortez Abbott. He concluded his review: "To explain Napoleon we need more than epigrams—and fortunately we have the facts. . . . We do not need dithyrambs nor rhapsodies."

Today

On page 5 of this issue David Owen reviews a new discovery in the Napoleonic field, "With Napoleon in Russia," from the Memoirs of General de Caulaincourt. In the course of his review, Mr. Owen explains how the manuscript came to light two years ago, and goes on to say: "I am tempted to recommend Caulaincourt's account as a textbook on the psychology of dictatorship."

Letters to the Editor: *Whitman and the Immigrant*

Salut au Monde

SIR:—Quaint contrast between Walt Whitman's ideas and those of his latest editor:

After [Whitman] came the promiscuous influx of immigrants from Europe, some of whom so abused our hospitality that the United States is no longer open to all comers. The American race of which Whitman had high hopes now embraces people from all parts of the globe, many of whom differ widely in political and social ideals from the sturdy pioneer stock he celebrates. Had Whitman lived into the twentieth century he would probably have been grievously disappointed in the types of personality that actually evolved, so different from the type he expected to emerge from a hundred years of American democracy.—*Specimen Days, Democratic Vistas, and Other Prose*, edited by Louise Pound, Professor of English, University of Nebraska (New York, 1935), pp. xxxiii; xxxiv.

Walt Whitman, "Salut au Monde":

You, whoever you are!
You daughter or son of England!
You of the mighty Slavic tribes and empires! you Russ in Russia!
You dim-descended, black, divine-soul'd African, large, fine-headed, nobly-form'd, superbly destin'd, on equal terms with me!

You Sardinian! you Bavarian! Swabian! Saxon! Wallachian! Bulgarian!

You Jew journeying in your old age through every risk, to stand once on Syrian ground

You other Jews waiting in all lands for your Messiah!

You own'd persons, dropping sweat-drops or blood-drops!

You human forms with the fathomless ever-impressive countenances of brutes!

I dare not refuse you—the scope of the world, and of time and space, are upon me.

My spirit has pass'd in compassion and determination around the whole earth;

I have look'd for equals and lovers, and found them ready for me in all lands; I think some divine rapport has equalized me with them.

HOWARD M. JONES.

Ann Arbor, Mich.

Mrs. Govan is not Mrs. Burman

SIR:—AU SECOURS EXCLAMATION POINT IN YOUR REVIEW CHRISTINE NOBLE GOVANS BOOK FIVE AT ASH-FIELD SATURDAY REVIEW YOU SAY MRS GOVAN IN PRIVATE LIFE IS MRS BEN LUCIEN BURMAN BEING BESIEGED WITH WIRES AND LETTERS ASKING WHAT DOES THIS MEAN INTERROGATION POINT GRATIFYING ATTESTING CIRCULATION SATURDAY REVIEW BUT HIGHLY DISTURBING TO ONE WHO FLEES TO SAHARA TO WORK IN DESERT TRANQUILLITY HAVE NEVER MET MRS GOVAN BUT AM INFORMED SHE



"MARVELLOUS, GUSTAVE—IF ONLY I COULD WRITE LIKE THAT!"

IS CHARMING TENNESSEAN MRS BEN LUCIEN BURMAN WHEN SHE IS CALLED THAT WHICH IS RARELY IS ALICE CADDY STOP ALICE CADDY ILLUSTRATED ONE OF CHRISTINE NOBLE GOVANS BOOKS LAST YEAR THOSE PLUMMER CHILDREN PERHAPS BY SOME CURIOUS METAMORPHOSIS HER NAME IS ON THE NEW CHILDS BOOK THOUGH I AM CERTAIN SHE DID NOT ILLUSTRATE IT AS I AM ALWAYS REQUIRED AFTER A HECTIC NIGHT OF SKETCHING TO GO TO THE POST OFFICE AT FIVE OCLOCK IN THE MORNING TO PERSONALLY MAIL HER SKETCHES TO PUBLISHERS AND HAVE BEEN OCCUPIED EXCLUSIVELY IN PAST FEW WEEKS MAKING SUCCESSION OF DAZED SUNRISE TRIPS WITH HER DRAWINGS FOR NEW ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS EDITION OF STEAMBOAT ROUND THE BEND PLEASE PUBLISH SOME SORT OF EXPLANATION CORRECTION ETC SO THAT THE PEACE OF THE DESERT MAY ONCE MORE DESCEND UPON US

BEN LUCIEN BURMAN

Literary Statistics

SIR:—The two lists, each of fifty recommended books, which you took apart for examination in the editorial, "Some Literary Statistics," in the issue of November 9, are indeed a little sad. But the greater list of 1,000 from which they were selected (they are all published in a pamphlet under the title, "Good Reading: a Guide for College Students and Adult Readers . . ." by the National Council of Teachers of English, 211 W. 68th Street, Chicago, Ill.) is worthy of more attention. In the longer list there is no undue emphasis on fiction, the choices are broad and well classified, there are annotations,

and in the case of at least one division, philosophy, the forewords are downright attractive.

It does have its weaknesses, of course. The various annotators exhibit prejudice and in other ways show inexperience in their small but special and important art. The time lag is noticeable. . . . One might cavil further, but the fact is that among lists of this type, "Good Reading" is the best that has so far appeared. As such it has its uses.

I am moved to these remarks because at the moment I am seeking a small, select number of readable books for possible placement in dormitory libraries. I have my personal ideas as to what is readable, and I have at least half a notion what college students prefer. But I ought to be able to check my choices against something more vital than partial, undigested lists, or lists that are conservative and out of date as soon as printed. (The students themselves are furnishing some of the funds for purchase and I can't afford, for my own reputation, to make many mistakes!) In place of anything better, I have used "Good Reading." It has been helpful.

You say that "a careful, not a chance selection of strictly current books should be made for young readers . . ." That is the crux of the question. As Mr. J. Periam Danton, librarian at Colby College, recently has suggested, we ought to have a reviewing medium designed for college book selection. Or if that seems too far in the future as it well may be, we should have at short intervals two or three pages devoted to that purpose in a review such as your own. I believe the feeling grows in college circles that student needs merit such special attention.

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