

Tippling at the Pierian Spring

THE NATION, rather unkindly, advertises a series of its articles on literary critics as "scintillating gossip," not to be missed. This is too severe a description of "Our Critics, Right or Wrong," by Margaret Marshall and Mary McCarthy. They do not gossip, they quote, and their slaps on the wrists of reviewers who exuberate over each new genius are often deserved. It is an old, old story, varied only by the sadder case of reviewers who execrate the talents of new writers that afterwards prove to have been fine gold.

But critics of critics should be particularly careful of accuracy and good judgment in the bases of their criticism. These two ladies seem to us to have tippled a little at the Pierian spring, with the result that they write too fast for discrimination. They are certainly guilty of a fallacy which is as common as it is annoying. Let a reviewer remember the continuity of literature, let him out of a stocked memory recall the prime mover of a certain way of art, let him, in short, endeavor to show tradition at work and flowering every now and then in a new inspiration, and the dogs are loosed on him. Thornton Wilder's "Woman of Andros" reminds him of Theocritus's visit to the shrine of Dionysius. Sherwood Anderson in "Many Marriages" is a modern Bunyan trying to work in symbols, with results both noble and ridiculous. Immediately the critic is said, triumphantly by the publishers, scornfully by the critics' critic, to have asserted that Wilder is as good as Theocritus, Anderson is as great as Bunyan. What nonsense! Can it be that these ladies (and those like-minded in criticism) object to the existence of literary tradition, that they object to any attempt to relate the obscure present to the well-lit past? But they are related, deeply related, and unless these recurrent movements of the imagination are indicated in their proper perspective, criticism has no roots.

Once assume that a mention of a modern in his relation to an ancient means that the modern is as good as the classic,

and the road is clear for sarcasm. It is easy to say that the critic who in 1930 made Thornton Wilder equal to Theocritus, must have been subject to an emotional lesion, since in 1934 he was content to call him a miniaturist of talent. Of course Wilder was overpraised. Of course Bromfield was overpraised. All good writers, and certainly these two are good writers, are either overpraised or overdamned in their own generation. Only gentlemen like Mr. Michael Gold (whose Marxian "fist" these ladies admire) can settle "Hoti's business" once and for all by pointing out that since a given writer is not class-conscious he evidently cannot be a good novelist. And indeed who has the right to assume that these two American novelists are not important, not worthy of warm greeting, not integral to the picture of the American imagination in our time! This is not to say they are great. What is greatness in literature and who shall estimate it while contemporaneity still clouds our judgment? Was Crashaw great? Was Crabbe great? Was Longstreet great? Was Beckford great? Probably not, but we should have missed them if they had not written. We should have been sorry in their day not to have greeted them, perhaps more warmly than they deserved. We make no prophecies here, but assuredly to speak of the "twin, pale meteoric talents of Mr. Wilder and Mr. Bromfield" is an infelicity of the first order. They are not twins in any sense. Neither, by any twist of the word, is pale. And whether they are meteoric or not can only be said when the time for their stars to set has come.

Out upon this crabbing against the contemporary reputations of authors who at least write well, have certainly given pleasure, and are so evidently better masters of their craft than the critics' critics of theirs! To attack the blurbing which goes on in our press and is focussed by the publishers in their advertisements, is a battle in which all sincere reviewers should join. But the issue is merely confused when to make a nation's holiday paragraphers forget that we must live in our own times, and prize what we have, not extravagantly, nor with lack of discrimination, yet still with a willingness to drop questions of absolute greatness and give an author at least his due. For what the hurried or pedantic critic will not remember is that it is true in every sense that the work of art means more and should mean more to its contemporaries than to the absolute; and that if warmth of appreciation is ever justified it is in the reception of a new talent, even though it is not the talent of a Theocritus.

Read more carefully, ladies. Be more tolerant of enthusiasm, less sure that you know just who is good, who has succeeded, who failed. Talent, a miniaturist's talent like Wilder's, a social historian's talent like Bromfield's, is too rare to sneer at because these authors are neither Voltaires, Fieldings, nor Marxians prophesying a certain future. It is better that 99

weaklings should be praised than that one good man should be overlooked, or that his particular goodness even when minor should lack its sympathetic interpretation. Admit that, and we will gladly join you in dusting the coats of those whose enthusiasm has run away with their judgment, including our own. But do not be too sure that the public is wrong when they send books into fifteen or sixteen editions; or that you are right when you complacently bury talents which are at least much riper than your own.

Pulitzer Prizes The announcement that henceforth the Pulitzer prizes in letters and journalism will not be awarded to an individual more than once is long since overdue. The bestowal of the distinction upon the same person twice or thrice could hardly fail to be bad in its results, not only because it fastened in the public mind the belief that all merit resided in a few names but as well by making the award appear perfunctory. It would seem far better not to give an accolade at all, thereby preserving its dignity, than to derogate from its worth by letting it go to one who has already been its recipient and perhaps is the second time receiving it for less distinguished work than the first merely to carry out the terms of an intention. Pulitzer prize selections during the past few years have several times been such as to threaten seriously the esteem in which the award is held. If they are to be of serious consequence they should be withheld as well as bestowed, for it is by discrimination alone that they can continue to demand respect.

Ten Years Ago

Ernest Hemingway's first collection of short stories, "In Our Time," was published in 1925. Louis Kronenberger, who reviewed the book for this magazine, found "obvious traces of Sherwood Anderson" and "subtler traces of Gertrude Stein," but also "sound merit of a personal, non-derivative nature."

Today

On page 5 of this issue, Bernard DeVoto reviews Ernest Hemingway's latest book, "Green Hills of Africa." "The repetitious Stein of 'Tender Buttons,'" writes Mr. DeVoto, "doesn't show up here, but the Stein who is out to get four or five dimensions into prose is pretty obvious. . . And whereas [Hemingway] used to simplify vocabulary in order to be wholly clear, he now simplifies grammar till the result looks like a marriage between an e. e. cummings simultaneity and one of those ground-mists of Sherwood Anderson's that Mr. Hemingway was burlesquing ten years ago."

Letters to the Editor: *A Mark Twain Problem and a Dickinson Item*

The Mysterious Paragraph

SIR:—"Mark Twain; Anti-Victorian" was swell reviewing. Even a Doctor of Philosophy can be interesting and vigorous given such a subject.

Perhaps some one on your staff can solve for me a little Mark Twain problem that I've been wondering about for years. Here it is:—

A myriad of men are born; they labor, sweat and struggle for bread; they squabble and scold and fight; they scramble for little mean advantages over one another; age creeps upon them, infirmities follow, and humiliations bring down their prides and their vanities! Those they love are taken from them, and the joy of life is turned to aching grief. The burden of pain, care and misery grows heavier year by year; at length ambition is dead, pride is dead; vanity is dead; longing for release comes in their place. It comes at last—the only unpoisoned gift earth ever had for them and they vanish from the world where they were of no consequence; where they achieved nothing; where they were a mistake and a failure and a foolishness; where they left no sign that they existed—a world which will lament them for a day and forget them forever. Then another myriad takes their place and copies all they did, and goes along the same profitless road, and vanishes as they vanished—to make room for another and another, and a million other myriads, to follow the same profitless path through the same desert and to accomplish what the first myriad, and all the other myriads that came after it accomplished—nothing!"

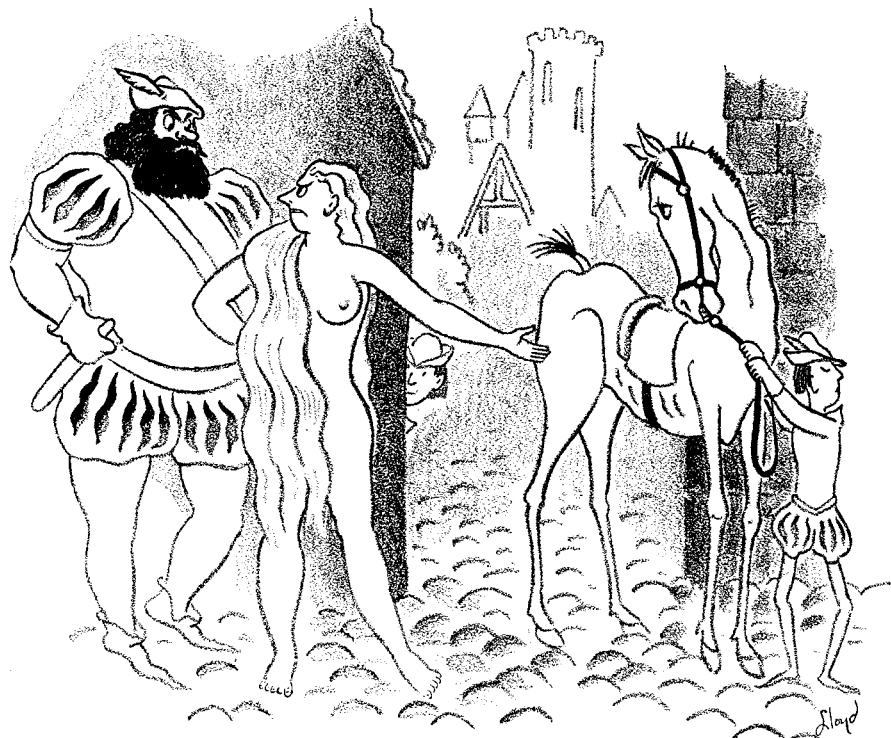
That smashing, beautiful paragraph was quoted in a box on the front page of a San Francisco evening paper nearly twenty years ago. Not in connection with any series, anniversaries, or anything else, but apparently because the editor had just read it, and thought it worthy of the front page. A by-line said that the paragraph was from Mark Twain's "Mysterious Stranger." I cut and saved the paragraph, and tried to get a copy of the book. Not until 1922 did I succeed in doing so, when I found "The Mysterious Stranger and Other Stories," published in that year by Harpers. The paragraph quoted above did not appear in this edition.

What I would like to know is: Was this stuff taken out of this beautiful little piece? If so, by whom, and why?

Oakland, Calif. E. B. FOOTE.

"In Back Of"

SIR: I was moved by Mr. Wright's letter about the hateful phrase "in back of" in your issue of September 28. I believe the most dangerous corrupter of the English language at the present time is the newspaper head-line. If a wrong word is shorter by even a single letter than the right word, it is pretty certain that it will be used provided it is intelligible—or sometimes even if it isn't. Thus we have "protest" for "protest against," "peril" for



"D'YE EXPECT ME TO APPEAR IN PUBLIC ON A NAG LIKE THAT?"

(Addendum to Literature—Number 5)

"imperil," "wait" for "await," and so on. It wouldn't so much matter if such words would only keep their place. But unfortunately they work their way little by little into the text as well. I regret to say I have seen some of them even in the columns of the *S. R. L.* And so the "well of English" becomes further defiled. Is there positively nothing that can be done about it?

E. C. FROST.

Oakland, Cal.

"The Lover's Mother Goose"

SIR:—Collectors and students of Emily Dickinson will be interested in a curious anthology of verse entitled "The Lover's Mother Goose," illustrated and apparently compiled by John Cecil Clay and published by The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Indianapolis. The title-page bears no date, but the copyright is 1905, and the book was presumably published that year. Emily Dickinson is represented by two poems, "If you were coming in the fall" (p. 78) and "Have you got a brook in your little heart?" (p. 88). Both of these lyrics first appeared in "Poems, First Series," 1890. The following bibliographical points will serve to identify this mélange of verse lavishly illustrated in color. The title-page, preceded by verse and illustrations, appears on p. 9 and reads as follows: The/ Lover's/ Mother/ Goose/ By/ John Cecil Clay (in manuscript facsimile)/ *Toujours Amour* . . . / The Bobbs-Merrill Company/ Publishers Indianapolis U. S. A./ The title-page is illustrated by a procession of six geese and a cat-tail.

Opposite the title-page is a drawing in

color entitled "The House That Jack Built." The table of contents is found on pp. 13-16. The main text comprehends pp. 17-92. (My copy may lack a final leaf or two.) The size of the leaves is 11½ x 8⅞ inches. The volume is bound in gray cloth, with the title in gilt on the cover and the spine. There is a drawing of a girl's head on the cover.

The authors surrounding Emily Dickinson in this anthology include the following: Clarence Hawkes, Burges Johnson, Edmund Steadman [sic.], Swinburne, Herrick, E. S. Martin, Ellen Hutchinson, Paul Dunbar, Richard Gilder, Oliver Herford, Rossetti, Rostand, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Kate Putnam Osgood, Robert Burns Wilson, Charles G. D. Roberts, Edmond Holmes, Wilde, Tennyson, Stevenson, Henley, Shakespeare, Robert Bridges, J. Vance Cheney, Walter Learned and James Whitcomb Riley.

The illustrations, drawn in the early 1900's, are very characteristic of that period.

LEWIS M. KNAPP.

Williamstown, Mass.

Open for Nomination

SIR:—I am interested in getting together the finest pieces of English prose. I know that there are anthologies on this subject but I should like the reaction of your readers regarding what, in their opinion, are the twelve finest specimens of English prose writing. For convenience we will limit the length of these to fifteen hundred words. Hoping to hear from those who are interested.

HARRY TAYLOR.

Pittsfield, N. H.