



## Spook Writing

THIS editorial is written by one who has been wandering in the West and a little endeavoring to teach the first principles of good writing—at least, as they appear to him. Out where the sea without shore is, his desk was innocent of current periodicals. But he has returned to them—to those of every sort and kind, from big, fat ones with handsome young women in several colors on the slick covers, through weeklies of various shades of red to a quarterly review with two yellow pincushions on the cover, which is now published in Holland, at the Hague. Opening the last-named idly and at random, the following is encountered. And it is not a whit stranger than many of the other contributions by other hands.

### LOVE POEM

Oh pinionated slough of you. Ich bach  
da denyamay.  
Il culture ne far bull yákamay  
Derenj é fákamay cum sar

Say boygen yállamay the itch da rest  
Is nothing but a clean come yákamay  
I put the whip upon the whip  
And let the high wide handsome go  
"Why do I care for you here in the  
twitted twilight"  
"Here by the rocks in the pool"

Yes, it's certainly warm in New York, after the cool nights in California; and when called upon to write a summer editorial one feels enervated enough to let the high wide handsome go; but then there's the whip upon the whip, and we are in harness again. . . . We are in harness again to literature. As above? Well, it seems to be the latest word. . . .

Of course it is nothing new. It has been getting increasingly that way for years. What then were we trying to teach in our distant summer classroom? For we spoke of the love of language and the use of words—indeed, of the fanatical love of words. And here are confronted and twitted by their twilight. We far and away prefer journals of radical opinion, for in one of them we encounter

### THE DYING LUDDITE

(Yorkshire, 1812)

"Name your accomplices!" said the priest  
to the man who lay with darkening  
eyes.

"So may you, haply, be released  
"from hell's eternal fires, to feast  
"in mansions in the skies!"

The wounded man turned on his bed.

"Can you . . . keep . . . a secret . . .

Sir?" he said.

"Yes, yes!"—the quick reply.

The Luddite slowly raised his head  
and whispered, "So . . . can I!"

That is a fairly bad poem, but we prefer it to the impressionism of the other, which we might better appreciate were we a linguist. For the rhetorical question of the first poem is of not the slightest importance, while the courage of mankind is worth celebrating under whatever circumstances found. But of course we know that Great Art is practically non-communicable and that if it obviously means anything it is so much the worse . . . not that we believe that for a split second. Between rebellious thought and the mere rebellious jugglery of words we shall always choose the former. We have a theory, too. It is that, in the face of large and vital issues before the world, such distractions and entertainments as the first poem have lost practically any validity they originally possessed. One of the editors of the magazine from which we quoted the first poem avers that Abstract Art no longer needs defense, even (we suppose) as abstract writing and the multiplicity of imitations of Joyce's "Work in Progress." Perhaps one reason it needs no defense is that today it does not seem worth attacking. There are enough horrid practical matters deserving attack without breaking jabberwocky upon the wheel. We ourselves prefer the original, and the Reverend Dodgson, the Great Originator. If you care for your nonsense neat or biting as metheglin, we give you either Lewis Carroll or James Joyce. Accept no substitutes!

For certain youngsters, however, such "literature" is profoundly significant. 'Twas ever thus and ever will be so. As we look back upon our summer's teaching it makes our insistence upon the precise use of words, and saying what you mean, sound like the idle prattlings of a babe. How simple were our examples. How much subtler the "Spuk (sic) of the Present," in which it is averred:

In the fulness of the blacking loor  
we hear a fleercry that dristas our  
singer into duallas. Is the balatin in  
gral now?

Verily the outgrabing of the outgrabing  
mome raths, Brothers, that is Art!

What of this Spook (we prefer our own spelling) of the Present? This—that it dates already. A few novelists choose to run certain words together; but, mainly, their aims are understandable. Genuine Spook Writing, however, is drawing to-

ward its twitted twilight. The young radical poets, for instance, are deciding that they have something vital to say and, in no uncertain terms, are trying to make themselves heard. Meanwhile an essentially *fin de siècle* affair persists in the midst of urgent and aggressive expression. Perhaps yet shall rise the Piers Plowman of this age. Who knows but the Chaucer of the Proletariat is already in the womb of time?

The esthete always runs things into the ground. But so much more important things than esthetics have been run into the ground of late, where they breed earthquakes, that literature may perceive its important tasks. We have, today, plenty of writers who perceive them. They can use experimental technical devices too, so long as they make for more immediate communication. Meanwhile, on the fringes of writing, still gyrate the spooks. But no longer do they seem as beguiling as in the happier days when—

Oh when I was a little ghost,  
A happy time had we.  
Each seated on his favorite post  
We chumped and chawed the buttered  
toast  
They gave us for our tea!

It is mean and nasty, perhaps, to be too hard upon the spooks—too impatient of them. They have frequently furnished us amusement and they furnish themselves, obviously, entertainment no end. If their phantasmagoria seems too tortured to harbor any real fun, they are not apparently aware of it. But, without adopting too serious a tone, they are certainly not the voices of the future. They are the last outpost of an individualism caught finally in a *cul de sac* of gibberish. And they also are products of their age. Perhaps they are the peak of so-called civilization. Which is commentary enough in itself.

## Ten Years Ago

George Moore's "Heloise and Abelard" was reviewed by Ernest Sutherland Bates in *The Saturday Review* for August 14th, 1926. Mr. Bates wrote in his review: "It is perhaps a pity that Mr. Moore could not have more nearly united the two Abelards, the historical character and the creation of his own fancy. . . . To find the real medieval Abelard one must go to Henry Adams not to George Moore. But to one reader who prefers philosophy to love there are hundreds, including most philosophers themselves, who with Mr. Moore prefer love to philosophy. For these, through many years to come, and perhaps for all time—who knows?—the tale of Heloise and Abelard, according to George Moore, will rank among the great love stories of the world. Their saga is no longer a vague memory haunting the mausoleum in Père Lachaise but is lastingly enshrined in literature, hard by the tombs of Deirdre, Iseult, and Francesca."

## Letters to the Editor: *Dictionaries and the Constitution Do People Read?*

### A Constitutional Criterion

SIR:—In his fair and comprehensive review of "Storm Over the Constitution," Walton H. Hamilton brings up a subject on which I should like to state my position. Regarding my assertion that the Constitution, as seen by its framers, is broad enough to include the powers recently exercised by Congress over money, revenue, agriculture, industry and finance, Mr. Hamilton says:

It is hard to contradict his thesis. In fact at one strategic point his case is far stronger than even he knows. The legal fate of the program for the public control of "business" hangs precariously upon the word "commerce." It has not occurred to Brant—who in justification can plead the highest judicial precedents—to appeal from Sutherland, Butler, and Roberts, JJ., to Samuel Johnson and Noah Webster, and to explore the confines of the word in the eighteenth century dictionaries.

In 1787, says Mr. Hamilton, "business" was merely the state of being busy, "industry" was a thrifty virtue, while "commerce" was a broad term comprehending all forms of intercourse with kinsman, hussy, or merchant. "It required the greater part of a century," he observes truly, "to effect the judicial corruption of commerce from 'intercourse' and all that pertained thereto to the physical movement of goods. As for the current lingo of 'stream' and 'flow,' 'barrier to' and 'burden upon,' 'direct' and 'indirect effect upon,' the Fathers of the Constitution would have been completely stumped."

But it did occur to me to consider the eighteenth century dictionaries. I refrained from citing them because, in the Constitutional Convention, the framers used the terms "commerce" and "trade" interchangeably, thus destroying the value of the Johnson-Webster definitions of commerce.

For example, when Madison (September 14, 1787) said that he was "more and more convinced that the regulation of commerce was in its nature indivisible and ought to be wholly under one authority," Roger Sherman replied that "the power of the United States to regulate trade being supreme can control interferences of the state regulations when such interferences happen."

Both of these statements by leading framers of the Constitution are breathtaking in their nationalism, but they make "commerce" and "trade" synonymous. If they are so treated, and the argument is based solely on the attitude of the framers as disclosed from time to time in the debates, "trade" expands to the broad implications of eighteenth-century "commerce." But if the dictionaries are relied upon, synonymous use in the convention tends to bring "commerce" down to the narrower dictionary definition of "trade."

The method I used brought me in fact to the precise position reached by Mr. Hamilton, as may be seen from the fol-



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lowing on page 142 of "Storm Over the Constitution":

In 1787 agriculture and manufacturing were not set off from commerce among the states by a high blank wall, to be scaled or defended by "directlies, indirectlies, or remotelies." They were the heart and essence of commerce, written down, ahead of all other commercial matters, in the sole proposal in the Constitutional Convention for an executive department to deal with the domestic affairs of the nation.

The Constitutional Debates show conclusively that the framers used the word "commerce" to include the full business life of the nation, and the word "trade" just as broadly. But since there is room for dispute on dictionary definitions, and no room for dispute whatever as to the actual inclusion of agriculture and manufacturing within the commercial power as the framers saw it, I prefer to rely on the words of the constitutional debates. By either criterion, "commerce" was far more inclusive in 1787 than it is today, after the century of judicial corruption to which Mr. Hamilton refers.

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### "Dornicks" and "Dornachs"

SIR:—In the S. R. L. of August 1st: "Old Q. was pleased to notice a reviewer in this paper, last week, using the good old American word *dornicks*, (meaning brickbats or boulders). The etymology seems obscure."

Among the older Scotch-Irish . . . perhaps among the straight Gaelic Irishmen also . . . of the earlier part of the last century, and antecedent to the Revolutionary War, there was a wise old saw, relative to the good sense of using what-

ever material came to hand, whether of the best quality or not: "If ye can't get hewn stane, you mun use dornachs," that is, rough stones. Isn't this the father and mother of the "good old American word 'dornicks'?"

JOHN BENNETT.

Charleston, S. C.

### The Prevalence of Reading

SIR:—In your editorial, Non-Fiction, you mention the original market for books by Gibbon and Carlyle. As compared with modern best-sellers those books obviously had a small sale. Cultivated men and women were rarer then, but their cultural batting average was high.

As more and more people became literate, the book business flourished; but the reading habit outran the development of critical appreciation. Relatively only a small number of readers could find pleasure in books written by competent craftsmen who used hokum sparingly.

The situation has not changed materially, in my opinion, except that the number of both cultivated and uncultivated persons has increased. The former provide a growing market for good writing of every kind. On the other hand, the literate but uncultivated masses, by and large seem unaware that taste may be developed by persistent self-exposure to the merits of those books which find a continuing market, with successive generations of readers. After some research indeed, I am convinced that the run-of-mine products of our public schools are reading less and less, as the movies and radio progressively fill the void in their lives, formerly occupied by novels of rapid-fire action and slushy sentiment.

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