

English by Discipline

FOR some of those who attended the dinner of the New York Classical League in honor of the bimillennial of the poet Horace, the experience must have been like a dip into the past. Once again the Latin quips and quotes crackled and flamed as in long ago Phi Beta Kappa dinners, and once again the familiar if half understood words of the great Romans echoed in pronunciations so various that Horace himself might have needed a dictionary.

And shall the classics die, and shall the classics die?

Here's thirty thousand classicists will know the reason why!

That was the mood of the occasion, a mood not without justification.

Those of the middle generation who are college bred still remember the dominance of the classics, and particularly Latin. They remember the felt necessity of an education in Latin for those who would write English. They remember the roll and swing of the English writers they were asked to imitate, whose sources could be dimly felt in the Cicero and the Virgil they translated so laboriously in class. Style in its essence, as was often told to them, was most successfully learned from the classics, and a writer in English could not be said to be formed until he could feel his Latin derivations as he wrote.

And it is probable that as they grew older many of them began to associate, and associate rightly, the rhetorical urge of a Ruskin or a Carlyle, the built-up rhythms of a De Quincey, the ponderous dignity of the nineteenth century moralists, with this same foster mother, Latin. They felt, and perhaps rightly, that a Gibbon, an Addison, a Dr. Johnson, and a Boswell, had learned to think in Latin, because Latin was not only the medium of their education but still for them a living speech. Yet they suspected that the rapidly expanding knowledge of the nineteenth century had made this education by the classics a little artificial, a grace more

than a necessity. They began to believe that the sonorous style of Latinized English was no longer inevitable for educated men, was indeed often as incongruous in the expression of the new life and new ideas of the industrial age as a tail coat and knee breeches on a dweller in the new suburbs of a factory town. And so they began to welcome, sneakily at first, then wholeheartedly, the classically illiterate prose of journalism, or to praise those scholarly writers of English who had found, without sacrifice of dignity, the idiom of a native life—the prose of such men as Hazlitt in England, of Thoreau in America.

But this is all past history. The reaction is over, the battle is won, the question is no more what has been gained in escape, but what has been lost in escaping. And certainly there has been a loss and a heavy one. English prose today is flexible, it is picturesque, it has an extraordinary sense for the specific word, it has a rich vocabulary, freely used. It lacks (speaking generally of course) grace, precision, and flow. Its general practitioners lack especially the power of putting into typical, definitive form the important things they have to say. They are good, and especially the Americans, at pithy phrases, but skill leaks out of them as they go beyond the sentence. They express adequately, but not finally, their most significant conclusions. Compare any anthology of the best essays, chapters, editorials, stories, or formal pronouncements of contemporary English, with a selection from the eighteenth century, and the difference will become immediately manifest. We shoot all around the target, and when we do hit it, shoot again. Thus it is extraordinarily difficult to find an address, essay, analysis, or warning in the last twenty years that has the definitive quality of the best essays of Emerson, of a review by Macaulay,—to stop far short of Burke and Swift.

The change—the failure, for it is a failure—is probably due to the disappearance of a discipline. We whose schooling is some decades back think of translation as a perfunctory boredom best remembered with disdain. Perhaps it was in our day, yet translation where, as in the heyday of the classics, the subject matter translated was felt to be of the highest importance, is one of the greatest disciplines of the mind. It is an exercise in two vocabularies; it is, what is much more important, an adventure in the high art of finding in one system of thinking and feeling the words which can express another and very different one. It is the finest of all training for that high art of life which is to know and justly express yourself in terms of society.

The lack of this discipline is reflected in the loose and tentative character of so much modern writing. We have won our fight for linguistic nationalism; we express ourselves in a diction we have made ourselves; but in the course of the re-

bellion we have lost power because of a lack of difficult practice in the skill of expression itself. And no wealth of descriptive vocabulary can entirely make up for that.

This is no argument for an education by the classics. That—in our exigent curriculum enriched by a dozen new knowledges—will continue to be an opportunity for specialists, a luxury for anyone else. But translation of felt importance, as a discipline, as perhaps the only way of realizing that language is a tricky, dangerous, yet adaptable and manageable mathematics of culture—such translation should become again a part of our education. And probably Greek and Latin, as representing cultures far removed from our own, will serve the purpose best, now, as they have in the past. Some later generations may find Chinese still better because even richer in a content that requires even more skill to bring into our own orbit. But the laymen at the Classics Dinner clearly felt that Latin was hard enough for their time.

Mary Johnston

The death of Mary Johnston reminds us that there have been few historical novels more successful than her "To Have and To Hold." It swept the country at the height of our rediscovery of an aristocratic, honor-seeking America after the profit-making orgies following the Civil War. It was part tinsel, part silk, part old-fashioned stage illusion. But those who would see what this capable historian-romancer could do with honest material should read "The Great Valley," still the best story of Indian captivity and escape.

Ten Years Ago

A London Letter from "Roderrick Random" in *The Saturday Review* of May 22nd, 1926, resolved itself into a discussion of four "young" English novelists who had recently been chosen by André Maurois as being responsible for the most "important work" of the period. They were E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, David Garnett, and Aldous Huxley, but, in the opinion of Sachem Random, no one of the last three had "so far written anything worthy of rank beside 'A Passage to India.'" He disapproved of "Mrs. Dalloway" by Mrs. Woolf which had just appeared. He felt that Mr. Garnett's work was leading nowhere, and that "he must either repeat himself ad nauseam, or find an entirely different method." Of Aldous Huxley he was more charitable. He did, however, describe Mr. Huxley's philosophy as being "so desperate" that it could "only be termed decadent."

Mr. Random also mentioned a new book by H. G. Wells in the course of his letter. He predicted that it would "arouse exceptional interest."—Title—"The World of William Clissold."

Letters to the Editor: "Genius Is Not Enough;" "Rulers of America"

Accumulated Issues

SIR:—For some months I have been so busy with my own book that I have allowed the issues of the *Review* to accumulate unread. But for three or four days I have been gobbling them down. It strikes me that it is becoming stronger all the time—more positive in expression, reaching out for reviewers with a greater variety of opinion, and increasing somehow the virtue of brevity in their reviews. It was a fine thing to publish Thomas Wolfe's attempt at self-analysis; and it is even finer to follow that with the splendid and constructive analysis by DeVoto. Follett's review of "Sparkenbroke" was also fine; and Morley's spoofing was glorious. How inevitable—but just as inexplicable—the horrified hurt of some readers! No really good thing was ever injured by parody.

VIRGIL BARKER.

Captiva Island, Fla.

Pious Dither About Form

SIR:—Mr. DeVoto patently does not even know what Thomas Wolfe is. Who ever said he was a novelist, anyway?—I do not believe his most hysterical admirers ever tagged him that, save as a term of convenience, or in the sense that he is a writer of book-length prose.

Why all this pious dither about form, as though Mr. Wolfe, in passing up this phase of "novel" writing so dear to the classroom's heart, were practising rather naive and unintentional heresy? Mr. Wolfe is no "novelist"; he is a purveyor of tides and tides of flowing words, bringing on their systole and diastole all the bright, terrible images hitherto submerged, dragged up at last from God knows how far and made vivid, articulate, and static for all time between the covers of a book!

I do not mean to imply that Mr. Wolfe is above criticism, but I do mean to say that he is being judged by the wrong measure. Mr. DeVoto has endeavored to encompass the ocean in his little bushel basket. The spectacle is a ludicrous one.

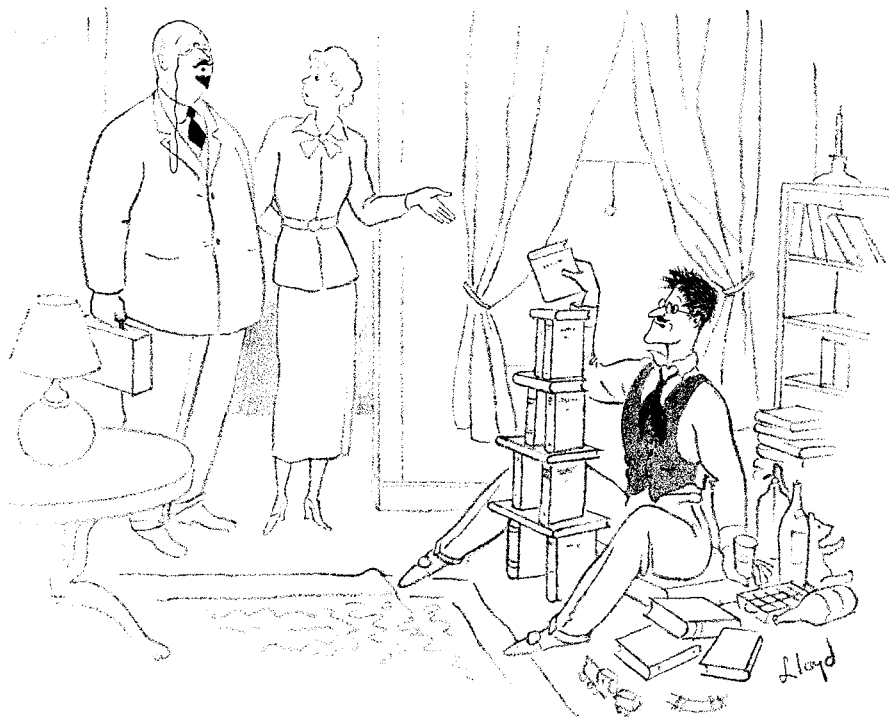
MILDRED C. ANDERSON.

New York City.

Wolfe Without Art

SIR:—Mr. DeVoto in what was otherwise a surprisingly illuminating article on Thomas Wolfe, talks altogether too much about the mystic Art of Fiction, and Mr. Wolfe's lamentable lack thereof. Now I don't hold any brief for Mr. Wolfe (quite the contrary!), but I do think there are a lot of other things that "America's Dostoevsky," "the James Joyce from the South," "Our Twentieth Century Dickens," needs much more than the Art of Fiction.

I imagine we may assume Mr. DeVoto has in mind some higher sort of Fiction Art. But just the same, although there is plenty that is radically wrong with Mr. Wolfe, Art of any sort is just about the last thing that could help him. With writers like Wolfe (or his little brother,



"HE'S JUST WRITTEN HIS HUNDRED AND FIRST JUVENILE."

Saroyan) it is only their complete lack of Art, their completely bewildered muddlement that makes their Yawp the least bit tolerable. With Art added, it would just be impossible to go near them.

BARNEY BERMAN.

New York City.

Words Are Not Enough

SIR:—I am putting down Bernard DeVoto's appraisal of "The Story of a Novel" to add my penny's worth to the growing symposium of ideas concerning Thomas Wolfe's work. "Look Homeward Angel" was a great book because Ben was in it; take out Ben and all that pertains to him and you have a story as pointless as—as "Of Time and the River." After all, an author must offer character and story. Words are not enough, either, if I may paraphrase Mr. DeVoto.

MOURINE HALLIBURTON MCGEE.

Tulsa, Okla.

"A Study of Finance Capital"

SIR:—In his review of "Rulers of America: A Study of Finance Capital," in your issue of March 7, E. D. Kennedy has made several errors of factual statement. It is not criticism to damn a book while misrepresenting what it says. Mr. Kennedy avoids any argument on the underlying thesis.

First. The title of the book is incompletely given. The important subtitle—"A Study of Finance Capital"—is omitted at the head of the review.

Second. When Mr. Kennedy wanted to discredit as too long my list of companies having some link to Morgan or Rockefeller interests, why did he confine himself to 362 in the "Morgan" list and 227 in the "Rockefeller" list and overlook the

larger figures (444 and 287) which include companies for which no report on assets was available?

Third. He takes obvious pleasure in scoffing at the list of companies having Morgan, First National Bank, or Bonbright & Co. "as banker." He claims that deposits have no significance. I disagree with him about this—as did the Senate Committee investigating Stock Exchange Practices which obtained from the Morgan firm and published a list of companies having deposits in the Morgan private bank. Mr. Kennedy mentions only deposits although this section of the "Morgan" list is carefully defined as companies with which the Morgan inner group "have had relations through carrying deposits or underwriting security issues." I suppose Mr. Kennedy would hardly deny that the Morgan group has some industrial power and that investment banking has been an important element in that power.

I do not, as Mr. Kennedy asserts, "set up a Morgan influence" in Standard Oil Co. On page 40, in introducing this section of the "Morgan" list, I explain that it is made up of companies "mostly in some degree under Morgan influence but not controlled by the Morgan firm." And again: "Some of these, like the Van Sweringen brothers' Alleghany Corp., are really as close to Morgan as the inner area described above. Others, like two Rockefeller oil companies, are clearly outside of the Morgan empire and only include some business relations with Morgan."

Fourth. Mr. Kennedy gives a false impression of the way in which I present not only this section of the "Morgan" list but the Morgan and Rockefeller lists in

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