

The Saturday Review of LITERATURE

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My Dear Edmund Wilson:

LET me explain to the subscribers of *The Saturday Review* that I am abandoning my editorial anonymity because, in *The New Republic*, you have challenged me to "stand and unfold" myself. You want to know the bases, though I understand you to imply the singular, from which I am editing this magazine. If you are interested in knowing them, conceivably some of our subscribers are too, which justifies this answer. But I estimate that I should need at least forty thousand words for an adequate statement, and my editorial judgment is that the magazine cannot devote so much space to such an enterprise. You must take fifteen hundred and let the rest develop informally as I go on editing the *Review*.

Your article seems to me sensible and very fair. You are partly wrong in thinking of me as an academic: I was a full-time teacher for only the first of my seven years on the Harvard faculty, I have no graduate training or degrees, and such scholarship as I may claim is in the field of American social history. You ignore some rather important points made in my book about Mark Twain and, I think, misunderstand certain others. Let me say too, as gently as possible, that I think you take too seriously certain essays of mine which most people take, and which I intended, as jokes. You see, I never anticipated holding such an office as this and, when I was younger and much given to sin, I sometimes seized a chance to exploit the merely comic values. There are other assertions in your article with which I should take issue if I could have my forty thousand words, but I must disregard them here if I am to say anything about your central point.

You complain that you cannot make out, in my criticism at least, any unified, articulated system of ideas to which I am referring when I pass judgment on books and ideas. You ask me to forsake the seats of the scornful and state what my system is. What set of ideas do I champion? What generalizations do I

stand on? What theory of the world, what metaphysics, what structure of abstractions? The answer is brief: None. I have no such system and I profoundly disbelieve in such systems.

For, you see, this is a demand for a gospel, and I have been acquainted with it since my earliest days. I was brought up in a religion which taught that man was imperfect but might expect God's mercy—but I was surrounded by a revealed religion founded by a prophet of God, composed of people on the way to perfection, and possessed of an everlasting gospel. I early acquired a notion that all gospels were false and all my experience since then has confirmed it. All my life people around me have been seeing a Light that, with a vision certified as excellent by the best oculists, I have been unable to see. At first astonishing contradictions in the reports they gave me troubled my mind but, you will understand, I came to conclude that absolutes were a mirage. And in my desert country mirages are also commonplace.

I distrust absolutes. Rather, I long ago passed from distrust of them to opposition. And with them let me include prophecy, simplification, generalization, abstract logic, and especially the habit of mind which consults theory first and experience only afterward. That would have been the simplest way to describe me for your purposes, since it accounts for most of the objections you raise: that I have attacked a lot of people whose ideas seemed to me out of touch with known facts and common experience. People who prefer the conclusions of logic to the testimony of their senses. People who do not recognize that the behavior of the human race cannot be accommodated to a syllogism. People who ask the race to be logical about illogical matters and rational about irrational ones—and who slump into despair and the lust for dictatorship because it refuses to be. People who insist on applying deductive reasoning—and prophecy—in areas where it is the testimony of experience and common sense that deductive reasoning and prophecy have no force.

I am, if you must have words, a pluralist, a relativist, an empiricist. I am at home with the concrete inquiries of historians and scientists, and uneasy among the abstractions of critics and metaphysicians. I confine myself to limited questions; I try to use methods that can be controlled by fact and experience; I am unwilling to let enthusiasm or desire or a vision of better things carry me farther than the methods will go by themselves. I rest ultimately on experience and, where that fails, on common sense. No one need tell me how incomplete and imperfect they are, how misinterpretation and falsification betray them, how tentative, fragile, and unsatisfactory the conclusions we base on them must be. I know: but they are more dependable than

anything else. They are, especially, more dependable than gospels.

So I leave to others the elaboration of systems and theories that transcend them, that go beyond. My job is to carry limited objectives: to test the data that are presented to me and, so far as I can, separate the factual from the illusory, the experimental from the guessed, the verifiable from the hoped and desired. This will not get me far and, in the mass, it will not get the race far. But if it gets us only a little way, that little will be subject to use and control, and it will stand. At any rate, that is what I choose to do, leaving general ideas and systems of thought and theory to others. I can be fairly sure of the empirical fact—but I am even surer that the great system, however inspiring, animated by whatever nobility or benevolence or terror, is out of touch with things as they are. If the instruments with which you measure a continent are wrong by so little as one minute in a degree, still you will come out at the end with a grotesquely false description of the continent, and any maps you make will grossly delude those who try to follow you, possibly into catastrophe. But the instruments of thought which our system-makers use must at best err far more than that one-sixtieth of a degree. As, perhaps, I shall be able to show you from time to time.

I wonder if you are not troubled because you understand this master-condition of prophecy? You are something of a Marxist, but are not the seismic shocks in your association with other Marxists due to your perception of the difference between prophecy and experience? Your allies, who periodically become your enemies, look at the map which Marx has made of the present and the future, and where Marx says a mountain or a molehill must be found, they find it whether it is there or not. But sometimes you refuse to submit the testimony of your senses and your experience to the dictation of the gospel, and once more your allies excommunicate you. But sometimes you do not refuse. You tell me, for instance, that Marx and Engels exploded Utopian socialism almost a century ago. Oh, my dear Wilson! They merely asked us not to apply that label to their gospel. Is not Russia resolutely demonstrating to us that the dictatorship of the proletariat is no more than a Utopian vision? Or if you will not agree to that, what about the classless society? And you tell me that my outline of Mormon history exemplifies Marx. Perhaps, but the weightier consideration is that it exemplifies Pareto's criticism of Marx.

(I suppose that you and others will sometime force me, in sheer boredom, to discuss the application of Pareto to literary thinking. I am not much of a Paretian. I am mainly interested in finding out how useful Pareto's method of analy-

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Letters to the Editor: *Authors vs. Reviewers; Illiteracy before 1066*

Reviews and Rebuttals

SIR:—In my reply to your editorial of December 12 [on Letters to the Editor] which you were good enough both to publish on January 2nd and to consider in your own editorial columns on that same date, we agreed that a short and factual letter is neither a possible nor an effective means of rebuttal for the author. Nevertheless, in the third paragraph of your editorial you offered as your only remedy the fact that *The Saturday Review* is willing to publish any "relevant corrections which the author or anyone else" sends in.

I think it fair to ask whether you are not clinging here to a solution in which you yourself have little faith, with a secret feeling that the problem is really insoluble. I cannot accept such a gloomy view of the situation without one more struggle for an answer, and therefore beg your indulgence if I discuss it again.

It seems to me that either of the solutions which I originally suggested is feasible and practicable, and that a third one might also be considered. I should have stated explicitly, however, that the problem is important culturally only with regard to one group of books. It should be obvious that it does not apply particularly to reviews of poetry or fiction. And I think that we can also rule out those purely technical works which reach only technically trained audiences, and which therefore should be reviewed only in technical journals of science, history, economics, art, and the like. What we have in mind here is the problem which is created by that growing body of literature which deals with technical topics for intelligent laymen. Such books are usually in highly controversial fields: the facts and interpretations of history, economics, capitalism vs. socialism, the organization of society, the impact of modern science on human life and religion, sex, and the like. In such matters, feelings tend to run high, and prejudices can be exploited all too easily, both by authors and by reviewers alike. Nevertheless these books are of great significance in the evolution of the thinking community of this country. Therefore for them it is particularly important that careful, fair, and accurate, and at the same time hard-hitting and unsparing criticism should be meted out. Sometimes these books are reviewed in technical journals; but such reviews do not reach the general public, and do not affect the reception of the book by the community at large. It is the review of such books in journals such as yours which is of general importance; and it is for them that a special technique of review or rebuttal is needed.

For this limited group of books, therefore, I would make three alternative suggestions, two old, and one new: (1) that if an author can convince the editors of *The Saturday Review* that his book has been significantly distorted and misrepresented in the review, the editors of the magazine, without publishing the details of the controversy, shall make an



official disclaimer of the review; (2) that all seriously denunciatory reviews shall be submitted to the author, and that the author and the reviewer shall be required to iron out their differences of opinion as to what the book says, not their differences of attitude towards the ideas or opinions expressed, before the review is released and printed; or (3) that all such books should be given two simultaneous reviews, one by a proponent of the author's main position, and the other by an opponent.

Others may find a better solution to this problem than any of these three; but I cannot accept the attitude that although it does no good there is no better alternative than the feeble gesture of publishing an indignant author's useless protest.

I would add one further word, which is that my challenge is directed less towards *The Saturday Review of Literature* than to any other magazine which publishes serious book criticisms. These letters have been addressed to you because your own editorial of December 12th raised the topic; and I thank you for your hospitality in allowing the discussion to proceed this far.

HAYES HARRISON.

Rochester, N. Y.

The Conquest of English

SIR:—The editorial in your number of Jan. 23 is so good that I am moved to make it better by righting the only mistake I find in it. Mr. Canby touches the Middle Ages at one point, and in so doing he slips up. He says, "When used by illiterates of the 12th and 13th centuries, Anglo-Saxon, a highly inflected language, broke down its grammar into its present analytical simplicity. What seemed a calamity proved to be a vital gain for the speech." But English was used by illiterates before the 12th and 13th centuries. In King Alfred's century, the 9th, it was hard to find anybody who could read and write, and though by the 11th conditions had greatly improved, literacy remained highly exceptional; it was practically confined to the clergy, and most of these had

little book-learning beyond the elements. At no time in the Middle Ages, indeed, can written English truly be said to have any influence on the inflexional system. The calamity to which Mr. Canby refers was, no doubt, the Norman Conquest, and certainly one of the effects of this Conquest was to reduce the number and the importance of those who read and wrote English, but such readers and writers had always been far too few to keep English inflexions from changing. Had there never been a Norman Conquest, our present inflexional system, in all likelihood, would have come into being much as it actually came. The fallacy into which Mr. Canby fell is the common one of reading the past in terms of the present. Nowadays written English works strongly against inflexional change; in the Middle Ages such workings were negligible. Not so in the matter of vocabulary; but that is another story.

KEMP MALONE.

The Johns Hopkins University,
Baltimore, Md.

Chautauqua

SIR:—As a native of Chautauqua County, N. Y., interested in orthographic rectitude, I should like to submit that the name *Chautauqua* is not spelled *Chatauqua*. Rather frequently I see this erroneous spelling in print, the latest being in Mr. V. F. Calverton's recent article in the *Saturday Review*.

According to Mr. J. N. B. Hewitt, Smithsonian Institution ethnologist, the word *Chautauqua* is derived from the Seneca word *T'kěñchiatā* "kwēn", meaning "one has taken out fish there," referring to Chautauqua Lake, and that should make it as clear as the n. on your f. that there should be three u's in the word. I can find no dictionary authority for any other spelling. It is sometimes seen also with a lower-case c (allowed but not preferred by Webster's Dictionary), but I don't like that either.

PAUL H. OEHSER,
Editor of the United
States National Museum,
Washington, D. C.