

The Influence of Books

On People Who Do Not Read

BY BEN ABRAMSON

PROFESSIONALLY, a bookseller knows only one class of people: those who buy books. This is a rough classification, to be sure, for it includes both those who read much and buy many books and also those who buy only "gift books" at Christmas or commencement time. My objection to these last is not that they buy gift books but that they buy nothing else.

But there is another class of people which the bookseller sees as through a glass, darkly. He doesn't know them, for he doesn't meet them. He is only aware of them as of an elemental force. They are the people who do not read. It is for them that gift editions are made. For them, radio serials are produced. It is they who get the front seats at the Balaban and Katz theatres. It is they who write fan letters to Robert Taylor. Only God can make an actor, but they can make stars. To them publishers address their ballyhoo, for it is they who put a book on the best-seller list. It takes genius to write a great book. But it is the people who do not read who determine that book's commercial fate. I don't understand fully how it is done. But this is something like the way it works.

A book is published of which nothing extraordinary is expected. The publishers advertise it no more and no less than the rest of their list. The bookseller stocks a moderate quantity. Then, without warning, he is bombarded with orders and so is every other bookseller and every circulating library. Perhaps there was a radio talk by Alexander Woollcott; perhaps a rumor was circulated to the effect that the book had been or was going to be suppressed. Overnight it is a best-seller. It is bought, borrowed, talked about, sometimes even read. But the people who have started this bombardment do not, in any important sense, read. They look into the book, they may even on every word, but what they are doing is trying to find out what everybody is talking about. Then, because they forget easily, the best-seller is old stuff in a few weeks. The people who read may still be reading it, they may discover it months or years hence, the book may, in fact, be immortal. But literary immortality is a very quiet thing compared with the ten-days' fireworks of best-sellerdom.

I have written so far of the effect on books of the people who do not read. But my subject is the effect on *them* of the books they do not read. Books, as I believe has been said more than once, are like dynamite. They are the products of man's imagination, and imagination is continuously reshaping the world. It may even have created the world—it certainly

created what we call civilized man. This dynamite may strike what seems to be an immovable body of beliefs and concepts, and shatter it completely. The man who reads understands what has happened, at least in part. He has felt the tremors, heard the distant rumbling, and when the blast comes he is on solid ground from which he can survey the upheaval and judge its consequences. But the man who does not read is mentally dislocated by the blast. He finds himself out in the cold without knowing how he got there.

The most famous example of a book of this kind is Darwin's "Origin of Species." Men of thought everywhere found this work an exhilarating experience. It was a challenge to thought and it was accepted as such by intelligent and well-balanced people. It was not necessary for them to accept Darwin's conclusions; many disagreed. The important thing was that old frontiers of thought and knowledge had been broken down and exciting new vistas spread out before them. But the people who do not read were shaken out of their accustomed mental grooves and felt only resentment. To them the book boiled down to an implausible assertion that their grandfathers had been monkeys.

Now, to make a sharp break from advanced biology into the field of popular fiction, there is the case of "Babbitt," by Sinclair Lewis. Lewis did exactly what he set out to do in this book, and it was a good book, carefully observed throughout, though without much imagination. The subject of the novel was not Babbitt himself but the effect upon a man's life of the phony ideal of service. People who read found this a stimulating piece of satire. People who do not read were vastly offended. They did not understand where the story ended and the satire began. Certain details that were inserted for verisimilitude were taken for satire—for instance, the circumstances of Babbitt's life. He worked in the city, lived in a suburb, commuted every day, played golf on Sunday, was no longer in love with his wife, and frequently dreamed of his stenographer. Thousands of men in similar circumstances thought that Lewis must consider it stuffy to live in a suburb and play golf. On the contrary, these were the pleasant features of Babbitt's life, features that Lewis himself, possibly, enjoys as well. As to Babbitt's emotional state, it was a tragic one, and the most tragic thing about it was that Babbitt did not consider it so. The satire of the book was directed at Babbitt's attitude toward life, not at his place of residence or his recreations.

And now that the people who do not read have been accustomed for a generation to Darwin's ideas and for several

years to Lewis's, a mood of tolerance has set in. It is not that they have grown to accept these ideas—they had no convictions about them before and they have none now—it is just that the strangeness has worn away and they are used to them. They now repeat and take for granted ideas that have become more or less respectable with the passing of time. You often hear a business man (who lives in a suburb and works in the city) refer to himself laughingly as a "Babbitt," or make some joke about his ancestors while he stands in front of a monkey-cage. He has not learned to think, he has simply been induced to swallow.

Look at the fate of Karl Marx's "Das Kapital," among the people who do not read. "Das Kapital" is a difficult book to read and if it is widely unread. One man, a student perhaps, reads it and understands it, or at least grasps its essentials. But he has some variations of his own to introduce and in the process he extends Marx's argument in the direction of his own peculiar bias. He "interprets" Marx and his interpretation is more readable than the original. A writer for the intellectual magazines reads this apparently learned condensation and uses it as the basis for an interpretation of his own; and in doing so he still further distorts a distortion. His article, in turn, is read by a writer for the popular magazines who "popularizes" it—that is, completely corrupts the original expressed thought which he has received at fourth-hand. Then a writer for the daily journals publishes his version, in which all the misconceptions along the line are served up and additional ones of his own thrown in. The journal for which he writes is read by a guy who makes a speech in a beer-hall or on a soap-box before people who not only don't, but can't, read. And that is the story of the house that Marx built.

A writer's commercial welfare depends upon the people who do not read. If he has enough stuff in him to be widely misinterpreted, he will travel by the thousands of copies on street-cars, on sleepers, on trailers, he will fly through the air, he will go down to the sea in ships. He will go far—but the one place he can never penetrate is the brain of the public. However, if he is at their mercy, they are also at his. They can't do without him—they are a literate people. They've got to know enough about his work to discuss it at dinner, they've got to write papers about it for their club meetings. He haunts them, goads them, worries them. And he has more prestige among them than among the people who do read, because reading people discriminate. He has more prestige than all the scientists and all the humanitarians; more even than actors, because the people have seen the actor and can safely criticize his appearance and his gestures. But the writer's business is so mysterious. However does he think up all those things?

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English '37

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Much of the resistance or discomfort of the reader which this discussion undertook to explain comes from the novelist's offering him material which is not properly fiction at all or which has not been completely converted into fiction from its original state.

In this discussion certain terms have been frequently repeated. We have spoken, for instance, of the "scene" without bothering to define what is meant. The word seems inevitable, a natural description of something which everyone who reads novels must recognize. It has also been natural to speak of the scene as moving or flowing, to object to certain things as interrupting its progress, and to commend other things as giving it rhythm or motion. Any discussion of fiction must approach one aspect of it with these terms or with similar ones. For an important attribute of fiction—in my opinion, the most nearly indispensable one—is movement. Easily recognizable when it is present, immediately missed when it is not, it cannot be easily analyzed. For the movement of fiction is not so simple as that of music, where tones follow one another in a time-sequence, or that of the moving picture, where movement in space is added to the succession of images in time. It is always a complex movement, since various kinds of motion usually occur at once, and to tell the truth it is sometimes only a metaphorical movement, since some of the things which produce the motion of fiction cannot be said with literal accuracy to be themselves in motion. Furthermore, though some of it is movement within the fiction, sometimes it is movement only in the perceptions of the reader, and sometimes, at its most difficult, it consists of a unique relation between the fiction and the reader. Nevertheless we must attempt an analysis, for fiction is a dynamic art, and a common mistake of novelists is to treat their material as if it were a static one.

The simplest approach is to examine the scene itself. It may have three kinds of primary movement. Obviously, it may move in space; less obviously, it may move in time; less obviously still it may move by being emotional or by producing emotion. (It may move, of course, in all three dimensions at once, and may also have other qualities of movement which we may call secondary.) When stately, plump Buck Mulligan comes from the stairhead, his dressing gown floats behind him, he raises the bowl, he speaks, he goes to the stairway, looks down, and speaks again. All his actions are obviously movement. We follow them precisely as we should follow them on a screen or, if we were present, on the tower itself. In the later, more subjective passage the same kind of movement occurs: "Their dog ambled about a bank of dwindling sand, trotting, sniffing on all sides." Less directly recorded, it occurs in "Do you

see the tide flowing quickly in on all sides, sheeting the lows of sands quickly, shell-cocoacoloored?" This kind of movement is simply physical action in space. It needs no further description, and it is the same whether the hero of the amateur's short story flicks the ash from his cigarette or Handsome Harry fiendishly pushes toward the buzzsaw the carrier on which he has bound the helpless and innocent Bertha who has thwarted his desires. It is physical movement in the scene itself and its primary effect is to keep the reader's visual image of the scene in motion.

It is not at once apparent that what Buck Mulligan says is also dynamic, but let us recast the sentences. "He held the bowl aloft and intoned the opening words of the introibo of the Mass." "He peered down the dark winding stairs and told Stephen to come up." Buck Mulligan's personal movements are still rendered directly, but what he says has been put in indirect discourse. "Told Stephen to come up" is reported, summarized, stated, whereas "Come up, Kinch. Come up, you fearful jesuit," reaches the reader in the process of occurring. It is in motion, whereas the statement of it in indirect discourse was static. Subject to reservations which we shall consider later, we may assume that dialogue is movement whereas a summary or statement of it is not.

(To be continued)

Thomas De Quincey

(Continued from page 4)

velopment until some years later in the hands of Dickens and Thackeray and Trollope. De Quincey indicated the trend toward realism in the style he used for the "Autobiographic Sketches" and the "Reminiscences," but his own tastes ran in the other direction. The style for which he became famous was based on the grandiloquent prose of the seventeenth century, particularly as seen in the writings of Milton, Sir Thomas Browne, Jeremy Taylor, and the translators of the King James Bible.

It is significant that one of the dominating passions of De Quincey's life was music. He was strongly ear-minded rather than eye-minded. He was only mildly interested in the art of painting which meant so much to Lamb and Hazlitt. He speaks of spending opium-drugged nights at the opera listening to Grassini in a melomantic rapture; his dreams were filled with the mighty pœms of a super-terrestrial organ. He was offended by the very presence of a book bearing on its backbone the harsh title "Burke's Works." When he wrote, he sounded every syllable in his ear before putting it to paper, and he built his single sentences and paragraphs on the complex patterns of a fugue.

It has often been maintained, especially by people ignorant of De Quincey's character and unfamiliar with any great body of his writings, that his work is the result

of opium-eating, and that he owes the particular grandeur of his style and imagery to the effects of the drug on his imagination. Opium, however, can not bring up out of the mind anything that is not already there. De Quincey says of the dreaming faculty:

He whose talk is of oxen will probably dream of oxen; and the condition of human life which yokes so vast a majority to a daily experience incompatible with much elevation of thought sometimes neutralizes the tone of grandeur in the reproductive faculty of dreaming, even for those whose minds are populous with solemn imagery. Habitually to dream magnificently, a man must have a constitutional determination to reverie.

There can be no doubt that his was a mind innately endowed with imaginative splendor. His childhood was rich with the wonder of life, and his adolescence was climaxed by a premature encounter with the nocturnal world of London that was forever to remain seared into his memory. Opium needed to serve only as a key to release into consciousness the secret images of his brain.

Opium played its part in his life, but much of its influence was malign. It furthered the growth of his all too ready habit of procrastination, and it slowed down his literary output. It brought him fame as an author but it also was responsible for the distorted estimation of his character that his contemporaries established—an estimation that has unfortunately persisted to this day.

The records of great men are all too often unduly weighted by the memorabilia of their declining years when their greatness has been firmly established. With De Quincey we are more fortunate, for he has left us a wealth of autobiographical material that is concerned with his youth. We can relive with him the life of a child in the days when "Dr. Johnson had only just ceased to be a living author"; we are permitted to jog along in the family carriage behind a postilion; we can visit the night-bound purloes of Oxford Street, forever haunted for readers of De Quincey by the pathetic ghost of Ann; and we can go down with victory on a coach carrying the Royal English Mail—and a diminutive Oxford undergraduate. These are the years that were filled with color—they are suffused with the heady air of morning. And the memory that most of us are likely to cherish of this odd little figure who made for himself an enduring niche in the history of our literature, is not of the wraithlike creature of the grey Edinburgh years, but of a youth who set out one bright morning to meet the vicissitudes of this world, armed only with "a parcel . . . a favorite English poet . . . and a small duodecimo volume containing about nine plays of Euripides."

The foregoing article in expanded form will constitute the Introduction to the "Selected Writings of Thomas De Quincey," edited by Mr. Stern and shortly to be published by Random House.



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Sense and Nonsense

LANGUAGE, TRUTH AND LOGIC. By Alfred J. Ayer. New York: Oxford University Press. 1937. \$3.

Reviewed by D. W. PRALL

IF this book were to be widely read for what it actually says about sense and nonsense in philosophy, it might work infinite good. Mr. Ayer thinks that "the majority of those who are commonly supposed to have been great philosophers were primarily not metaphysicians but analysts." Thus the brilliant school of logical positivism, which would purge philosophy of metaphysics, emerges as the heir of the thinking ages.

The important point, however, is that the argument of these men is on a new level. Knowledge, so far as it is not the validity of the analytic propositions of logic and mathematics, is totally made up of more or less probable hypotheses. Genuine hypotheses are in principle verifiable by defined empirical procedures, whether or not these can be carried out in practice. At this point we come upon the crucial new doctrine: it is only statements to which such procedures of verification are relevant that actually have meaning. Instead of arguing for or against such a question as whether or not our senses acquaint us with the "real world," the logical empiricist asks what sense experience would have any bearing on the question. If he sees that no such experience could occur, he sees that there could be no answer. If a purported answer is

given, he sees that it is nonsense. For its being true could not be distinguished from its being false. And a statement the truth of which would necessarily and in principle be indistinguishable from, and so equivalent to, its falsity, is precisely like a contradiction in that it could not possibly apply to anything whatever. Since this is settled once for all by the conventions of ordinary language, the requirements for communication, such a statement fails to make sense.

After the "elimination of metaphysics" on this charge in his first chapter, Mr. Ayer expounds the nature of philosophical analysis, the *a priori*, and truth and probability. He is then in a position to give us his convincing "critique of ethics and theology." After an account of knowledge, which belongs to a self recognizing other selves in a common world, we come to the concluding chapter. This reviews some of the main traditional issues of philosophy, exhibits their patent lack of meaning, and brings to light the significant function of philosophy as the logic of science.

Unsympathetic critics will damn "Language, Truth and Logic" as thin and dogmatic. They will neglect its analyses, while they hasten to conceal its palpable hits under a fresh layer of the solemn verbiage that Mr. Ayer has proved meaningless. Other more eager, or perhaps more serious, readers will find in the book not arrogant dogmatism but directness and stimulating conviction. Mr. Ayer's is not a philosophy to end philosophy; but it may well be taken as signaling the completion of a stage in modern thought from the vantage point of which—to take a case in point—the advocacy of medieval Aristotelianism to secure unity and coherence in university education will be seen to be either a revival of religious mysticism or downright obscurantism. Instead of such modes of sheer escape Mr. Ayer's healthy-mindedness suggests the dissolution of the confusion of our complex world by analysis. He gives us no glimpse of a Rock of Ages; but neither does he propound a transcendental hoax.

Philosophy is not and has not ever been the love of God or the love of righteousness; it is the search for knowledge. Its unity is the unity of science. Mr. Ayer sets out its present task and enunciates its proved method. We are thus left with logic and empirical science to bring order into the world of actual experience. And the perfect success of philosophy in this our only world would be the achievement here of a rational control for which only the technical methods of analysis can furnish the required knowledge.

A Titanic Struggle of Conflicting Cultures

THE CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION. By J. G. Randall. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company. 1937. \$5.

Reviewed by PAUL H. BUCK

AMONG living authorities on the Civil War era none deserves higher rating than J. G. Randall, Professor of History in the University of Illinois. From years of research and mature thinking he now produces a detailed, nine-hundred-page survey of the period 1850 to 1877. The publishers of this important work have seen fit to give it a format somewhat suggestive of a textbook. The book deserves, however, to be considered as a major historical treatise.

The vast output of published work dealing with the Civil War and its aftermath that has come from the press in recent years testifies to the common acceptance of the period as the most significant in our history for its decisive influence on American development. Mr. Randall's prime contribution is his masterly synthesis of this accumulated bibliography. He has shown rare discrimination in selecting the good from the bad in this literature, accepting the theses that are sound and rejecting the fallacious, and weaving the whole into a balanced and valid pattern. More than this, Mr. Randall has spent many hours of research in the vast body of source material which in spite of many workers still seems inexhaustible. Every one of his chapters gives evidence of many contributions of his own, so modestly introduced as perhaps to escape the casual reader. But every co-worker in the field will readily pay tribute to the research, intelligence, and judiciousness of this master.

A generation ago James Ford Rhodes published his seven volumes on the same period, a work rightly described as a landmark in American historiography. Comparison of Rhodes with Mr. Randall's new book demonstrates the tremendous advance in factual knowledge, scope of interest, and depth of interpretation made by a generation of American scholarship.

And yet, as the editor of *The Saturday Review* recently observed, we have not yet reached the final truth in regard to the cataclysmic middle decades of the nineteenth century. Before we reach that goal we shall need another generation of scholarship. Paradoxically it may be that the key to this new quest will be found in Seward's phrase "the irrepressible conflict," a phrase which Mr. Randall describes as "overworked," and one he combats as suggesting the inevitableness of the Civil War. Yet it should be pointed out, as Arthur Schlesinger has so often and patiently remarked, Seward originally coined the words not in reference to any coming war on the battlefield but to suggest the titanic struggle of conflicting cultures for mastery within one union. It was the destiny of American culture that was being decided, a choice of patterns, a selection of the way of national life from many ways of provincial lives.

Paul H. Buck is the author of "The Road to Reunion."

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