



What's Wrong With Criticism in America?

THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR asks us this question, asks us to reply in 250 words. We shall need more than that to answer, but perhaps they can find their 250 words in these columns.

What's wrong with American fiction? What's wrong with American morals? What's wrong with American politics? What's wrong with American literary criticism? These questions begin to grow wearisome. They are all based upon an implicit assumption that something is, not just wrong, but radically, hopelessly wrong. They are all by-products of that disintegrating, debunking, anarchical post-war period of the twenties, when the intellectuals of the country, finding their watches slow, began to take them apart and spit on the works. What was wrong with Greek morals? What was wrong with the Hebrew sense of humor? Plenty; and there are plenty of things wrong with America, but, for heaven's sake, don't let's always begin with the assumption that the watch is a rotten watch! Can you make another like it?

As for American literary criticism, it is at least as healthy as criticism elsewhere; indeed it is less dogged and diverted by the ideologies of political and social controversy. If there are no great critics visible, men who, like Sainte-Beuve in France, Arnold in England, Emerson in an earlier America, compel a new orientation between life and literature, this may well be because the body of literature itself, and particularly American literature, is being subjected to a new analysis by scholars whose patient search for factual truth is at least a first step in a new criticism. Our intellectual climate favors neither generalization nor the perception of significances, both of which are vital for criticism. Nor is a period whose radical thinkers swallow the economic interpretation of history, including literature, whole, likely to produce critics more interested in art than in propaganda.

Nevertheless, and thanks in part to

the impact of new ideas—Freudianism, Marxism, fascism, the cult of the pioneer, and the methodology of science—upon a criticism grown genteel and academic, the golden age of American reviewing has unquestionably been the last two decades. Never have so many active minds from so many areas of thought rushed, or been dragged, into the fray. Readers who remember with regret the admirable reviewing essays of the old *Nation*, or approve the often excellent leading articles of the *Times Literary Supplement*, forget that only a handful of books and these usually in poetry, history, or biography, were given their place in the sun by these leisurely and thoughtful studies. Ignorance, prejudice, flippancy, but most of all a skillful ignorance, was the best that most books could hope for by way of criticism until the twenties. Let those who doubt work as we have in bound files of newspapers and magazines! It may be asserted unhesitatingly that the batting average in exact knowledge, in objectivity, in sincerity, and in competence in analysis, of the responsible American reviewer today is higher, much higher, than it has ever been before. Nor does he, like his predecessors of a century ago, cover his ignorance or expand his ego by smoke clouds of whirling words. Reviewing in America is far more reliable than reviewing in England, far more honest than reviewing in France.

Our objection is to the form of the question at the head of this article, and to the assumption behind it. If *The American Spectator* cares to ask, What can be done to improve American literary criticism? a volume could be written in reply. Probably a futile volume, for it is our idea that if less were written about criticism, and more enlightened and passionate thinking put into criticism itself, we should all be gainers.

But one suggestion may be ventured, even in an editorial. If there is a lack in American reviewing it is the love of books. This much you could say for the genteel reviewer of the *fin-de-siècle*, that he loved his book; and of the sputtering ego of the early nineteenth century that he could hate his book. We are all so concerned with regionalism, nationalism, socialism, modernism, that the book as book too often gets neglected. Its control of ideas or history or behaviorism gets reviewed, but its living whole (when it is alive) is left for the reader to get if he can. Some reviewers are absorbed with the pioneers (whom we begin to find tedious), and some with the South, and some with the proletariat, and some with the reinterpretation of America. They know their stuff,—no shoddy history passes them by, no characters untrue to a contemporary ideology; and this is excellent. Yet fiction and drama and poetry are not social science, not even history. They stand and fall (as do many histories and biographies) not by their usefulness to our knowledge of the American scene,

but by the delight they give. We can never thank enough these informed minds who, even though they seem unaware of the significance of the timeless books of literature, yet at least with their common sense and their expert knowledge have made the sentimental blurring of the mere enthusiast seem childish and irrelevant, as indeed it is. But blurring is merely the pimpled face of a book lover fed on sweets. Book loving is as essential as ever it was for a criticism which considers the true aim of literature to be a lifting and clearing of the imagination, and, in the root sense of the word, a delight. For the book lover never forgets, and the history of literature gives him abundant confirmation, that no book lives in the imagination just because of Arkansas, or Freudianism, or the proletariat in its pages, but only because it has delighted the imagination by its art.

H. S. C.

William Dean Howells The centennial of William Dean Howells finds his critical reputation still in flux. At the time of his death he seemed to have long outlived his era, and since criticism was being forthright, he was generally spoken of as timid, time-serving, and superficial. That was largely because he avoided the problems of sex and showed a fastidious dislike of hairy-chested expressions. Today a different set of critical clichés has restored him to something like favor: his part in the Utopian literature of the early nineties is remembered, he is praised for having defended the Chicago anarchists in a period of public hysteria, and it is felt that his humanitarian sentiments would have made a proletarian artist of him if he could have lived in our more enlightened day.

Neither judgment is very realistic. Howells's historical importance is primarily that of a technician. Even more than Henry James he was responsible for giving the American novel form, and even more than Mark Twain he taught American writers to avoid rhetoric and to write simply, clearly, and straightforwardly. Writers of today who have never read him are nevertheless in his debt for some of the cadences they write, for some of the technical competence they have acquired, and for something of the color and clarity of the prose known as modern American. Apart from that, the very fastidiousness and inhibition that robbed his fiction of virility made it also a faithful repository of antiquarian material belonging to the last half of the nineteenth century. His mind was neither very powerful nor startlingly original, but his perceptions were sure, his integrity was absolute, and his craftsmanship as good as any in our literature. He mapped for the first time much of the area that American fiction was to explore, and he gave it instruments of precision for the exploration. That assures him a modest immortality.

Letters to the Editor: *Anne Carroll Moore on the Children's Book Shortage*

The problem of replacing worn out books in public libraries operating on reduced budgets has long been serious. In a recent newspaper interview, Miss Anne Carroll Moore, Superintendent of Work with Children at the New York Public Library, emphasized this problem as it relates to children's books. The editors wrote to Miss Moore, asking for statistics and other details of the children's book shortage, and we are glad to print her reply herewith.

Children and Book Famine

SIR:—A recent open discussion of the acute shortage of children's books in the branch libraries and the Extension Division of the New York Public Library has led to inquiries which I venture to think have a bearing on books and reading in general. That children should be starving for books to read in the richest city of the country, in the heart of a great publishing center, and in the thick of educational experiments concerned with reading interests, might seem a fantastic and unbelievable state of things did not bare library shelves and the clamor of unsatisfied children bear daily witness to the need for books.

What has caused this condition? Never adequately stocked to fully nourish and sustain the voluntary reading interests of the children of the city, the children's rooms of the New York Public Library have known poverty in varying degree for many years. Every measure of conservation has been tried but books will wear out. Rehabilitation is now required. The present sharp crisis is due to a reduction of budget allowing the purchase of less than one half the number of books normally added from year to year. During the past four years from 1933 to 1937, 236,751 worn out children's books were removed from the collection and only 173,662 were added. These figures include books added to non-circulating collections for reference and reading room use as well as for home use.

The turn-over in children's books is rapid and the wear and tear under the most favorable conditions is very great. Heavy duplication of titles most constantly in demand and full representation of subjects in which interest is keen, such as Aviation, Astronomy, Chemistry, Photography, Exploration, Archeology (a growing interest), Poetry, Plays, Stamp Collecting, Drawing, Music, etc., are needed to satisfy growing boys and girls who turn to the public library both to read for pleasure and for actual information which is up-to-date and reliable.

It unquestionably costs more to maintain a successful library for boys and girls in the 1930's than it did in 1910. Why shouldn't it? Yet no allowance has been made for this growth and change. New interests have been born and new books have been published to meet them.

No one is more critical of the factual soundness of his library than the intelligent boy of eleven to thirteen. Both reference and circulating collections must



"HE'S UNMASKING HER IDEOLOGY."

meet his challenge. It must be remembered, however, that such a boy and his fellows represent only a small part of the potential users of a great metropolitan library. Thousands of children of many races are *learning to read* there. They need an indeterminate number of books which are actually easy to read. Thousands rather than hundreds of easy books. Other children are rediscovering books of perennial appeal, and if they are to read them when they will mean most, many more duplicates must be provided. Certain books have their times and seasons of strongest appeal. Reading interests among children are contagious and are more often heightened and fed by their own early discoveries than by lists of required reading.

In reply to the question, Can you give a list of some of the titles of children's books that are most in demand and most need replacement? I gladly supply the following titles:

"Pinocchio"; "Tales from Grimm"; "Andersen's Fairy Tales"; "Brownies—Their Book"; "Tom Sawyer"; "Alice in Wonderland"; "Little Women"; "Huckleberry Finn"; "The Blue Fairy Book"; "The Jungle Books"; "Robinson Crusoe"; "Swiss Family Robinson"; "Little Princess"; "Under the Lilacs"; "The Last of the Mohicans"; "Floating Island"; "The Wind in the Willows"; "Meggy McIntosh"; "The Call of the Wild"; "Mysterious Island"; "Hans Brinker"; "The Arabian Nights"; "Peter and Wendy"; "Smoky."

To the question, How many of your books are replaced annually? the answer is not so easy.

In 1931, 103,349 books were added. In 1934 only 37,588. Immediate need would give precedence to certain titles at a given time regardless of the balance of a collection.

To the question, How many books are discarded without replacement? exact statistics are not available. In 1931, 102,048 volumes were deducted. In 1934, 66,477 worn out books were removed.

It can be fairly stated that the number

of duplicates of popular titles of books every child should have a chance to read in childhood has been reduced from twenty-five to two at a given circulation branch.

At least one million books are needed right now to feed the book-hungry children of Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island. Vast areas of the Bronx are still without library resources. More books and still more books in childhood until there are enough for all who show the slightest inclination to read will have a more positive effect upon the adult reading problems of the future than has yet been estimated. Allowing a wide margin for non-readers of books, both children and adults, this stubborn fact remains—there have never been books enough to go round among the children who are readers in the New York Public Library.

The love of reading for reading's own sake finds its stimulus in books of many kinds rather than in theories about reading. Nearly everything else has happened to reading except the provision of an abundance of good books to be read at the time when reading is both a challenge and an adventure. There is no more just or generous reader than the boy or girl of thirteen or fifteen and never in my experience have the boys and girls of this age been so forward-looking, yet so firmly established in their reading interests. Shakespeare is no longer a name. He has come alive for boys and girls of Negro Harlem in "Richard II," played by Maurice Evans. Walter de la Mare is a poet with whom the youngest are familiar because they like what he has written. Hans Christian Andersen not only wrote fairy tales. In these tales he provides a guide book to Denmark as Ruth Bryan Owen bears testimony in "Denmark Caravan."

Invariably do children respond to art and literature on their own terms rather than to diluted substitution which denies their status as readers for reading's sake.

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