

The Saturday Review
of LITERATURE

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Our Dried Voices

THE editor is slow to disagree with a contributor so learned in her specialty as Mrs. Lutes, but he believes that Hostetter's Bitters had a bourbon rather than a rye base. The point is important for history, and the opinion of antiquarians is solicited. It may even be possible to appeal to fact. Dr. Miles's Indian Snake Root Remedy still works its healing, and perhaps the dark, fluted Hostetter bottle, with its label printed in 5-point, can still be bought by those who suffer from spots before the eyes, backache, dizziness, or sinking spells. Great as Hostetter's was in therapy, however, it was greater still as a preventive, and through a long life the editor's grandfather seldom went to bed without three fingers of it inside him to immunize him against the possible miasmas of the morrow. He, too, was a lifelong teetotaler. He knew how miserable rum makes human life and no misery afflicted him when, the evening jolt of Hostetter's glowing in him, he tipped back in his chair beside the sitting room stove and hummed "The brewer's big horses" or recited:

Not for myself do I come here now;
I could suffer on, alone—
I come for my fatherless children, help-
less and starving at home;
Starving because their father for liquor
sold his life.
Thank God for the Adair Liquor Law!
the friend of the drunkard's wife.

Children, how many of you know what the Adair Liquor Law was? Just about as many, at a guess, as have worn the Daisy White Bronze Braided Bustle, which Mrs. Lutes mentions, or the Pompadour Porte-Joupe or Dress Elevator, which she doesn't mention. This was a belt from which hung eight cords that ended in loops. The loops went over buttons sewn inside the hems of various skirts, and there was a master-cord which came out over the belt and which could be hauled in by the wearer when she reached a muddy crossing. Modesty is all very well but nobody wants to

bring mud into the house on six petticoats at once.

Well, how many of you, on Friday afternoons, have stood up before the seventh grade and recited "The Psalm of Life" or "The Rainy Day"?

Be still, sad heart, and cease repining;
Behind the clouds is the sun still
shining.

Thy fate is the common fate of all;
Into each life some rain must fall,
Some days must be dark and dreary.

Poor simple sentimentalists, equally absurd in their easy tears and their silly courage. We have got past all that. Yellow flows as readily as blue used to, and the seventh grade is probably full to the bung with the brave modern spirit, telling one another:

Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar.

Our ancestors were pretty funny.

Mrs. Lutes could have mentioned a lot more literature. The editor did not grow up on the Southern Peninsula (*si quaeris peninsulam amoenam circumspice*) but he did grow up amidst that poetry. The young Della must have thumbed through annuals and gift books left over from her mother's day, and probably owned such paper-backs of her own day as "One Hundred Choice Selections," which was arranged by one Phineas Garrett, sold for a dime, and began a series of the same name which ran to heaven knows how many numbers. Mr. Mark Sullivan has decided that William McGuffey formed the tastes and shaped the minds of millions of nineteenth century Americans, and the docile spirits who tell us about American literature take Mr. Sullivan on faith. But if you look for the literature that those Americans quoted, deliberately or unconsciously, you will find that the greater part of it was barred from McGuffey. The McGuffey influence on our culture, in fact, is mostly a boom phenomenon of collectors' enthusiasm and the sectional pride of the Middle West. The millions knew much more literature than McGuffey ever taught them. You could learn to love honesty and thrift in the Fifth Reader but you couldn't learn to love much else. The passion for pure art, the noble lust for literature, was best fed by the annuals and the anthologies.

There was a lot of tears and mourning, drunken fiends, tubercular maidens, noble farmers, and dying warriors in that literature, but the important thing is, as Mrs. Lutes says, that it was declaimed. . . "At midnight in his guarded tent, The Turk lay dreaming of the hour"—if you don't think that can be resounding, close the windows and try it. By the time you get to "Strike for the green graves of your sires! Strike for your altars and their fires! God and your native land!" some-

one will be pounding on the floor above you. (A lesser generation may need to be notified that "Strike" has nothing to do with picketing.) A biography of this autumn has shown us one of the most cultivated of Americans, John Jay Chapman, quoting on his deathbed from "Bingen on the Rhine." Such a sanction may set some of the literary to researching in their origins. Let us hope that they do not miss Fontenoy ("Thrice, at the huts of Fontenoy, the English column failed"), or the upper Tennessee ("Move my arm chair, faithful Pompey, In the sunshine bright and strong"), or the name which the Muse of History, dipping her pen in the sunlight, will write in the clear blue above Washington's. But perhaps this is jingoism. Well, oppressed, "if we must fight, let us fight for ourselves! If we must slaughter, let us slaughter our oppressors! If we must die, let it be under the clear sky, by the bright waters, in noble, honorable battle!"

Lots of class struggle in that literature. And our forebears shed tears over "Give me three grains of corn, Mother, Only three grains of corn." Two generations before a recent genius wept to see a Vermont child eating roast woodchuck (but ask Elliot Paul, cook and gourmet, who knows that woodchucks are garden-fed game) their tears rose to,

I could get no more employment;
The weather was bitter cold,
The young ones cried and shivered—
(Little Johnny's but four years
old)—
So what was I to do, sir?
I am guilty, but do not condemn,
I took—oh, was it stealing?—
The bread to give to them.

They were anti-fascists too. Try Bob Ingersoll's vision at Napoleon's tomb. Bob decided that he would rather have lived in a hut with a vine growing over the door and the grapes growing purple in the kisses of the autumn sun, and gone down to the tongueless silence of the dreamless dust than to have been that imperial impersonation of force and murder. On Friday afternoon our fathers agreed with him.

We had a serious point to make, before this nostalgia attacked us: that the whole course of American literature before our own time was affected by this declamation. We will come back to that, for we promise you that it is important and has been too little taken into account. At the moment, however, we can't get past the text to the moral. Mrs. Lutes has made us think of the Blue and the Gray, little brown hands ("They drive home the cows from the pasture"), the Leak in the Dike (which is always misquoted), and Belzoni's mummy ("Then say what secret melody was hidden, In Memnon's statue, which at sunrise played.")

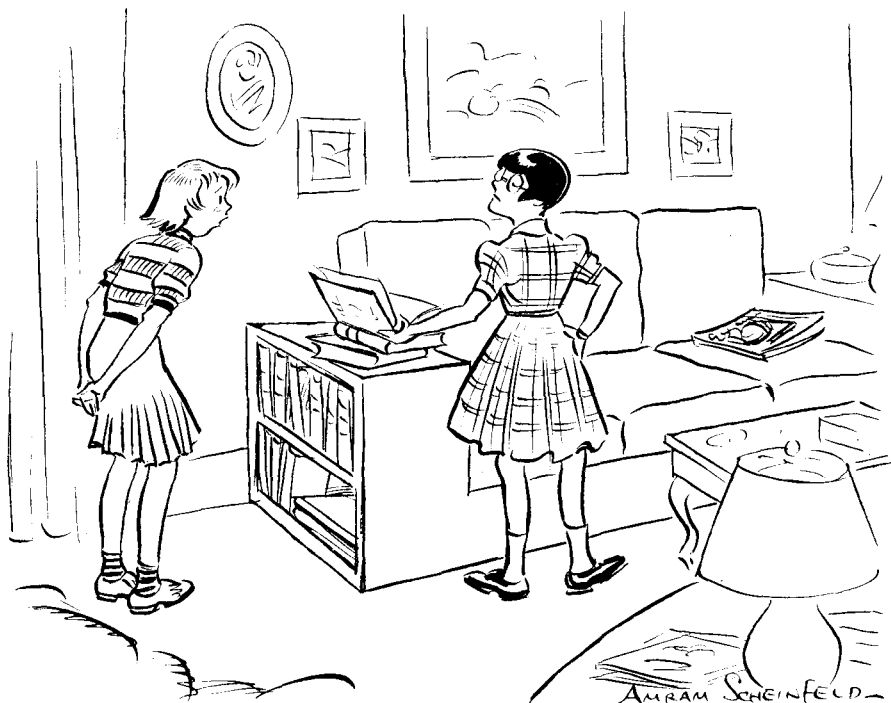
They were a vain and tawdry folk, our ancestors. They didn't put the Oedipus Complex into their poetry. How does "My son's wife, Elizabeth" go?

Letters to the Editor: *Mary M. Colum Replies to Howard Mumford Jones*

"From These Roots"

SIR:—I have read with astonishment Professor Howard Mumford Jones's review of my book "From These Roots," and as both his praise and his blame give an equally misleading idea as to what the book is about, I feel that in fairness to your readers I must offer some comment. My book is not a classroom textbook or a history of literature, but a book dealing with the sweep of literary ideas and literary philosophies as these were manifested in various literatures and by various writers, and was meant to appeal to the general lover of literature as well as to writers. It begins with Lessing's successful attempt to liberate German literature from professorial pedants and with his insistence on getting everyday life into literature; the development of this idea as well as others related to it traced through various manifestations in various literatures down to our own day. Mr. Jones ignores the subject of the book and deals with a few pages that have to do with his own classroom specialty, so that his final praise is more inept than his blame. As to his blame, it has chiefly to do with dates: the following is a sample. On page 53, he says, there is a paragraph likely "to leave on the inexperienced reader the impression that the 'Ancient Mariner,' which took shape in Bristol in 1797 was the result of Coleridge's visit to Germany in September, 1798." It might, if the reader only read a paragraph. But if he read the whole page, not to speak of the whole chapter, he could get no such impression. I quote Mr. Jones's sentence not so much to contradict it as to expose it, to let the reader see an example of pointless, pettifogging pedantry. O shades of Lessing! And, let me reiterate, Emerson's "American Scholar" was delivered after his return from Europe—not before.

Mr. Jones announces that literary history is full of pitfalls for the unwary. It is, and literature even more so; for literary history is only the background for literature, not a substitute for it, and requires no great talent for its mastery. Mr. Jones's obvious inexperience of literatures outside English makes it difficult for him to keep up the tone of a teacher correcting a schoolboy's theme which is his reviewing manner, so he takes sullen refuge in Dr. Johnson's comparison of a woman preaching with a dog walking on its hind legs. This used to be trotted out in Victorian times whenever a woman's work was considered. Allowing for his evident inexperience in the field of comparative literatures, it is still no less than staggering to find him stating that "by a simple trick" I leave out Fenimore Cooper. Why on earth should I include Fenimore Cooper in a work dealing with the evolution of ideas and philosophies in modern literature, and why should I, as a serious critic in a work on which I have spent years indulge in tricks, simple or otherwise? Any general reader with a love of literature could have written a competent review. From another point of view, a specialist review might have been written by one expert in the various



"I HATE TO SAY IT, MARGIE, BUT YOUR PEOPLE READ TRIPE."

literatures with which I deal. Mr. Jones never gets down to the matter of my book at all, and as a reviewer whose business was to get down to the matter of the book he has been incompetent. He shows himself incapable of visualizing any book on literature except a classroom textbook. Though mine is not a classroom textbook, every date and quotation has been checked and verified many times as is my habit and the habit of my publishing house. Books like "From These Roots" of necessity call for very few raw, unrelated dates. To compare small with great, it is similar in classification, if not in value, to certain books of Lessing's, Taine's, and Sainte-Beuve's. Taine's "Philosophy of Art" has hardly a date, and the same has to be said of a modern book like Van Wyck Brooks's "Flowering of New England." Chronology in such books has not "the surety of simplification" of Mr. Jones's textbook system. I took great pains to convey chronology to adult readers, not by the classroom method, not by a lifeless string of dates, but by indication, illustration, comparison of related incidents in significant periods—in short, by the method proper to a book dealing with the sweep of literary ideas. This meant first assembling all raw dates, not only in literature, but in history, philosophy, and science. As one attempting to write a book of creative criticism and as a critic conscious of historical and literary epochs, I considered it an obligation to present the chronology as memorably as possible to the general lover of literature and I wanted to make for him a live, swiftly moving book. But even in the classroom—for like Mr. Jones I have been a professor—I have always been at war with the textbook system of stuffing students with unrelated dates which mean nothing to them and which

they forget as soon as they leave college. My idea is to make connections between periods, influences, and milieus in various literatures. Mr. Jones, naturally, is at liberty to disagree with my opinion of the high literary value of the Declaration of Independence or of any other work I specify, but to fail to distinguish between a high and moving expression and the commonplace to which it is related is an obtuseness. He tells us that the Declaration is compounded out of the political commonplaces of the English eighteenth century. May I be professional for a minute and state that French eighteenth century commonplaces were also in the compound? When Mr. Jones announces that the general direction of my book is right, he shows no sign that he has grasped the general direction, nor does he exhibit any equipment by temperament or by training for deciding whether that direction is right or wrong. His praise is more inept than his blame. When he says "she is not afraid of being serious about literary philosophies when most of her contemporaries are merely dogmatic," I feel bound to ask: why not be serious about literary philosophies in a book on that subject? It is never the ably adverse and honest reviewer who is an author's bane; it is the futilely pedantic.

MARY M. COLUM.

South Norwalk, Conn.

From Mr. Jones

SIR:—Abusing the reviewer is always an easy method of disposing of unfavorable criticism. Most informed students of literary history will, I think, upon careful examination of Mrs. Colum's book reach conclusions very similar to mine.

HOWARD MUMFORD JONES.

Cambridge, Mass.