



Amateur Poetry

WE do not mean what an elder of ours used to refer to as "Minus Poetry." He possessed one of the most amusing collections extant of that work which is so bad as to be uproariously good. And the editors of that notable anthology, "The Stuffed Owl," have demonstrated incontrovertibly that even from the works of the great, priceless gems of this nature may be judiciously selected. Not only does Jove nod, but occasionally any poet's Muse.

That to which we have reference, however, is the large amount of work in the realm of verse that is, in a minor sense, adequate. It shows a certain amount of facility, even a certain amount of technical ability. It comes to us in America through a good many little books and a good many little magazines, most of them fairly attractive in appearance. It exists sometimes in unpublished manuscripts quite as good as those that achieve publication. You cannot exactly dismiss so much earnest endeavor, nor can you—half an hour after reading some such collection—recall anything in particular about it. It constitutes the soil out of which real poems and real poets grow. It is not precisely waste then, save as it may become a weariness to those so situated that they have to read a good deal of it.

The amateur poet is one who is content with the spontaneous expression of emotion in a medium whose possibilities have not been really studied, in a kind of writing to which he or she has not devoted enough intense concentration, in a craft that first demands the hardest kind of work with words. To be sure, an unusual sensitivity to experience is a *sine qua non* for the versifier who is ever going to be more than merely that; but equally certainly a highly emotional state is not nearly enough equipment from which to produce a poem. Amateur poets have rhythm in them, as have most human beings; usually they have also an ability to write in rhyme and metre. They have little tunes going in their heads and a liking for pretty words. They are sensi-

tive people—sometimes far too sensitive, for the real poet needs a certain toughness of fibre. Their writing is a kind of catharsis. And it frequently seems to them to have almost a religious aspect, in the sense that the words have "come to them" from some unexplained source and so may by no manner of means be changed. Their vocabularies are limited. They do not realize that so-called professional poets weigh and readjust every word, phrase, and line.

What we call "poetry," as a matter of fact, is an unreckonable matter that has eluded precise definition for ages. It is something that enters into a certain collocation of words expressive of a certain mood or idea, and may exist in the finest prose as well as in verse. But verse, like prose, is a craft that takes a deal of learning. When a writer has at his command, not only a thorough knowledge of the forms of verse and the possibilities of cadence whether rhymed or unrhymed, but also a precise ear for the sound of words, for their *look* and all their connotations, for even their shape and color—and words have these—he will write verse above the ordinary, and—possibly—poetry.

Naturally, he will also have something to express. But there are only so many human emotions, only so many fundamental ideas, and his power as a poet will reside in his own original choice of words, according to his own particular temperament, in which he may present any of these. That is quite aside, of course, from story-telling or narrative verse, in which he will also need as great powers as the good fiction writer in selecting incident and constructing his story. Verse being a condensed medium, he will also need considerable powers of concision.

The present writer, who has attempted it, has frequently heard it said, "But of course you cannot *teach* people to write poetry!" It is usually said with a supercilious air. No, you cannot teach anybody how or when the elusive thing called poetry may light upon and illuminate their words. But the amateur poet, if he or she wishes ever to be more than a mere amateur, will go to school, at least to himself; will set himself to practise—sometimes by the most notable drudgery—how not to be satisfied with first attempts, how laboriously to examine even the vowel and consonant sounds in any treasured phrase, how to use the blue pencil rigorously and go over and over his lines in his mind, till the excrescences are all too apparent and the more effective language begins to appear.

Amateur poetry is not analogous to amateur sport. It is not because professional poets make a little money from their work that they are professional. Also, they do a good deal more than merely profess. "Not all those who profess and call themselves Christians shall be led into the way of truth"—nor all who profess and call themselves poets into the

way of art. A professional poet is merely one who has thoroughly learned the craft of verse. And even then he will find himself under fire from later comers who interpret that craft differently. The whole answer, of course, is not merely hard work with words. But until the amateur poet has at least learned that much, and has disciplined his emotion, he will not—to say the very least—have achieved a tithe of the pleasure and satisfaction the expression of emotion is capable of securing him.

W. R. B.

Rural Free Libraries

THE President's Advisory Committee on Education, in its recent report, recommended a six-year educational program, with specific proposals for federal aid to rural libraries. It is expected that legislation will be introduced before the present session of Congress to put the Committee's recommendations into effect. This legislation has the support of the American Library Association.

Estimating that 39,500,000 people in rural areas are without library service, the Committee proposes a federal appropriation of \$2,000,000 for the first year of the program, \$4,000,000 for the second year, \$6,000,000 for each of the succeeding four years. "The grants to each State should be conditioned upon the establishment and maintenance of a State-wide library system through which free library service will be available to each inhabitant."

There is no question of the importance of establishing rural library service. It is arguable, ideally, that the establishment of rural libraries should be a local, not a federal matter; and that at least a proportional appropriation should be made by the states receiving federal aid. Nevertheless, in this case the practical argument overbalances the ideological; and the practical position is that rural libraries must be established by federal appropriation, or there will be few, if any, rural libraries established. The importance for a democracy of equalizing educational opportunities is the paramount consideration. The Committee reports that current library projects, improvised as a form of emergency work relief, "are being used eagerly by thousands of people who have never before had access to free public libraries." It should also be noted that the A. L. A. Executive Board resolution, endorsing the report of the Advisory Committee, recommends among other things that "federal funds be made available . . . for the construction in school buildings of rooms for school and community libraries." It is to be hoped that the project, following this recommendation, will use existing facilities where possible, emphasizing reading, not new buildings.

Further comment must await the introduction of the expected bill. Meanwhile the S. R. L. joins the A. L. A. in support of the Committee's proposals.

Letters to the Editor: *Commander Ellsberg Returns a Salvo*

"Hell on Ice"

SIR:—As the author of "Hell on Ice: the Saga of the *Jeannette*," I am struck by Lincoln Colcord's inconsistency in reviewing my book. In a review in another periodical on Feb. 6, 1938, he wrote:

And it must be said that Commander Ellsberg has performed his task faithfully and sincerely, with fidelity to the spirit as well as to the letter of the story. The additions he has made . . . inherent in the fictional form, are entirely legitimate. . . . "Hell on Ice" tells an appalling story, and the most appalling thing about it is that it is true. No wonder the book is destined to be widely read; it is a thrilling yarn, packed with drama from beginning to end.

And much more to the same effect.

Having delivered himself of this enthusiastic criticism, Lincoln Colcord then executes an about face and writes a letter to your *Saturday Review of Literature* (Bowling Green, March 19), in which he says:

I've recently dropped in to New York . . . to run full tilt into the old story of the *Jeannette* Arctic Expedition, which I knew in youth but haven't thought about for years. Commander Ellsberg has just done a fictional rewrite of it. I didn't like it. You did. That is because you don't know the splendid source material of the expedition, which Commander Ellsberg speaks of as merely "sketchy and conventional."

That unequivocal, uncompromising "I didn't like it," after all the praise "Hell on Ice" got from Lincoln Colcord, leaves me gasping. Are there no ethics in book reviewing? If so, what kind of critic is Lincoln Colcord?

I seem to have trodden on some of Mr. Colcord's youthful illusions, but I see no help for it. The source books mentioned are sketchy, without exception omitting important data, so much so that the one Colcord is most wrought up over, which skimps most of the *Jeannette's* story, carries an apology in its preface from its publisher on this very point, as follows:

"Readers of this volume [Melville's "In the Lena Delta"] may have expected a fuller account of that interesting period than will be found herein; and will consequently regard our brief narrative of it as insufficient and unsatisfactory. Certainly it does appear, considering the few pages devoted to this prolonged and remarkable drift that we have treated it too lightly—" Sketchy? Yes, but what can I do about it? The publishers have themselves confessed it. So leaving Colcord to battle this out with Houghton Mifflin Co., who over half a century ago published the book, I'll pass hastily along.

In spite of his professed admiration for "In the Lena Delta," Colcord next tries to land some heavy salvos on its author, Admiral Melville.

"The real hero among the survivors was Seaman Leach."

Poor old Melville! I suppose if he were alive now, his whiskers would droop in



"WE'LL SETTLE IT ONCE AND FOR ALL! WE'LL PRODUCE IT WITHOUT A SCARLETT O'HARA!"

shame at thus being caught accepting medals, promotion, and the acclaim of the world for his heroic conduct on the *Jeannette* Expedition when these should all by rights have gone to Colcord's nominee and near neighbor, Seaman Leach of Penobscot, Maine. Of Leach, it can truly be said that for fourteen hours he manned the steering oar in a storm-tossed boat, but what of it? His own life was as much at stake as anybody's. But Melville's case was very different. After all hands were safely landed by Melville's superb command of that boat, and Leach was on his way south to Irkutsk, Melville, although half dead already from exposure, voluntarily stayed in the frozen Lena Delta to search immediately for his missing captain—not for fourteen hours only but for a month, undergoing starvation and the fear of imminent death while he fought Arctic storms and inhuman cold in his long search, an epic of self-sacrificing devotion that brought him the warm-hearted acclaim of the entire world.

Who was the real hero? I suggest as a good solution of this dilemma that Colcord be permitted to keep Seaman Leach, while the rest of us take Melville.

But Colcord isn't quite satisfied by slurring Melville's heroism alone and lets fly another salvo, directed at Melville's competence as an officer:

"Lieutenant Danenhower . . . took over the command in the crisis from Engineer Melville, who knew little about boats."

Took over the command? What a travesty on fact! Melville himself initiated the vital decision to heave to in that

storm, took advantage (like any sensible commanding officer) of the varying talents of everyone in the boat from his subordinate, Lieutenant Danenhower, down to the Chinese steward, to help out, and carefully supervised what was done. To any skipper, Colcord's thesis that allowing a subordinate to execute a maneuver is having him "take over" the command is too ridiculous for discussion. Just to leave Colcord flapping idly like an Irish pennant in the breeze of his own nonsense, Lieutenant Danenhower, when that statement came up before the Naval Court, promptly denied it through his counsel:

"Mr. Danenhower did not and does not claim to have commanded the party."

The case of Colcord versus Melville puzzles me. What ails the man anyway? Why, when he apparently is so vociferous in his praise of Melville as the author of "In the Lena Delta," must he slander Melville's memory with respect to those important actions on which Melville's fame in this expedition really rests?

May I now chuckle a moment over the spectacle which Colcord makes of himself in his embittered final paragraphs wherein he endeavors to attack me? As one of those methodical engineers, trained to respect fact, in writing "Hell on Ice" I had to have at hand for daily reference a copy of the voluminous Congressional Investigation, where mainly appears the survivors' testimony showing the dissension and insubordination aboard the *Jeannette*, without which data (never otherwise published) no true account of

(Continued on page 20)