

Art and Fact

WHEN Thomas Wolfe, a stranger from America, came to Berlin a few years ago, minds harassed by politics, Nazi and otherwise, suddenly took fire. An earthquake shook the Prussian barracks, as Wolfe appeared like Pan, crowned with melodious and chaotic words, a mountain walking like a man. Even the street sweepers worked in an orphic haze, having read the titles of his books, which were profusely displayed in faultless translations in the windows of Berlin's innumerable bookshops. I was not surprised to learn from a recent biographical sketch of the great writer that only in Berlin did Wolfe taste unreservedly the sweetness of fame.

Ever since Goethe's death Germany has desired a great literature, but, like Italy, has never succeeded in equalling France, Russia, England, and America. She has had to be content with musicians and philosophers. But despite the inadequacy of her literary output, her interest in literature has never been daunted. It is still great. Compare the pages of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*—even now, some six or seven years after the Nazis arrived at power—with, say, the *New York Times*, not to mention lesser journals. The *Times* will shower practical information upon your head, it will drag facts from the remotest corner to display them in triumph before you, as Caesar paraded conquered barbarians—but it will never attempt to lighten the burden of all this informative matter by a literary excursion. It will never condescend to soften the severity of its findings by indulging in symbolic treatment, or by hinting that, after all, an event as such is unprovocative unless given life by feeling.

The *Frankfurter Zeitung*, now perhaps more than ever before, has the good sense to lighten the weight of

facts it necessarily records on the front page by the literary sallies of its last page. On the front page life is realistically presented, a disheartening spectacle of meaningless anarchy, calculated to reduce to melancholy anyone who does not discover the antidote of the last page. There, however, is to be found the sweet relief of metaphysical discussion, a feast of eternal truth well adapted to restoring mental balance. If you ask people in Germany why they read the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, eighty in a hundred will answer: because it has such a wonderful "feuilleton"—referring to the section below the line that sets off the lighter material from the more sober. Precisely the same answer would once have been made in regard to the *Vossische Zeitung*, the *Tageblatt*,—both gone now—the *Koelnische Zeitung*, the Viennese papers, and others as well. The German public never read the papers (with the possible exception of the *Tageblatt*), for their editorials, and only sometimes for their economic news, but always for their "feuilleton"—the literary supplement. Only the Nazi papers offered other attractions; but, then, they were never very widely read.

The *New York Times*, on the other hand, is not read because of the attention it bestows on literature; as a matter of fact it devotes only part of a page to books in its daily issues. Every Sunday, to be sure, it publishes a very good book review—a supplement which might be likened to an eighteenth century garden, so symmetrical is its arrangement, and so consistently do its reviews lead to the sober temple of reason. But when one considers the magnitude of educational enterprise in the United States and the quickness of the American mind, one surmises that there must be many ideas, shrewd observations, and complexities of thought which would profit by opportunity for literary discussion. Where can a writer find an outlet for the bit of literature he may have composed—not a long novel, not a scientific treatise, not a short story fabricated on the standard pattern—but an effort at self-expression, thoroughly and uniquely his own? So far as I have discovered there are three quarterlies to which he can send his effort—one edited in Baton Rouge, the other in Virginia, the third at Yale. Not one newspaper (save possibly *The Christian Science Monitor*) would so much as consider his very personal, very direct, and challenging contribution. In Germany, in normal days, he could have found hundreds of daily papers which were anxious to humor their pet child, the "feuilleton," with some unwonted sketch. Even if they had paid little for it, its publication

would have had value for the morale of the author.

It is paradoxical that the Germans with all their literary interest, should be fairly negligible as *littérateurs*, and that the Americans, whose gigantic newspaper organization does nothing to encourage blossoming talents and which has only three quarterlies providing an outlet for pure literature, should be producing what is perhaps the most outstanding contemporary literature. When I am asked: Why did you come to America? I answer, rather solemnly: "I wanted to breathe the air of Thomas Wolfe, Faulkner, and the rest." But these names mean less here than they do in Germany. Continentals will always be surprised by the fact-fetichism practised in America. It is only in American civilization that fact comes before art. Take, for example, the "Talk of the Town" in the *New Yorker*—a column pleasing and entertaining because it is so "artless." In it the facts produce the writer. His improvisations are not his own—they are the freaks in the carnival of events. *Life*, a short time ago, published a symposium on America to which Walter Lippmann contributed a splendid article. The symposium, good as it was, was nevertheless, I think, less felicitous in its effect than the *New Yorker's* "Talk of the Town" customarily is; it was too much like a sales catalogue, an engineer's manual, or a geologist's primer. Its intention was not to be casual, but to serve as a mirror of something great. Yet Victor Hugo writing of a spider transports me to higher realms than *Life* did when it spoke of America. You cannot rely too entirely on facts.

AN EX-GERMAN.

Books and Movies

A correspondent to one of the newspapers recently commented on the fact that a New York motion picture house which he attended had on display a row of books. It has always seemed to us that the publishers are missing an opportunity by not tying up their works more closely with current productions. There must be many, for instance, who have seen the picture of "Stanley and Livingstone" now on the screen at the Roxy Theatre, who, if some of Stanley's works were available (most of them, we believe, are out of print), or if the life of Stanley entitled "Bula Matari" were easily obtainable, would seize on a chance to read of the dramatic tale they had just observed. More and more the film is turning to historic incident for its episode, and more and more there must be desire for information on the events described.

A. L.

Letters to the Editor: *Sheean's View of the English and Emerson's*

Emerson on English Traits

SIR:—It has occurred to me that England and "English Traits," seen with Vincent Sheean from the top deck of the "13 Bus," have not changed much in the hundred odd years since Emerson's day. A check-up reveals that in 1833 Carlyle complained to Emerson of the "selfish abdication by public men of all that public persons should perform" and Emerson opined that "Truth in private life, untruth in public, marks these home-loving men. Their political conduct is not decided by general views, but by internal intrigues and personal and family interest. . . . They cannot readily see beyond England. English principles mean a primary regard to the interests of property." He believed they would not "fight for a point of honor nor a religious sentiment, nor any whim," but "offer to lay a hand on their day's wages, or their cows or rights in common, or their shops and they will fight to the Judgment." "Heavy fellows steeped in beer and fleshpots," he says further on, "they are hard of hearing and dim of sight. Their drowsy minds need to be flagellated by war and trade and politics and persecution. They cannot read a principle except by the light of fagots and of burning towns."

In re the flaws in their foreign policy observed by Mr. Sheean, Emerson says:—"Foreign policy in England, though ambitious and lavish of money, has not often been generous or just. It has a principal regard to the interest of trade, checked however by the aristocratic bias of the ambassador, which usually puts him in sympathy with the continental courts. It sanctioned the partition of Poland, it betrayed Genoa, Sicily, Parga, Greece, Turkey, Rome, and Hungary," to which list of crimes Mr. Sheean has added painful and bitter items.

Emerson did not wholly approve of the *Times* as it was in 1847, either, but "wishes he could add that this journal aspired to deserve the power it wields," and denies that the English press has a "high tone."

The only material change in "English Traits" seems to be that a hundred years ago, according to Emerson, "To pay their debts is their national point of honor."

M. M. OVERSTREET.

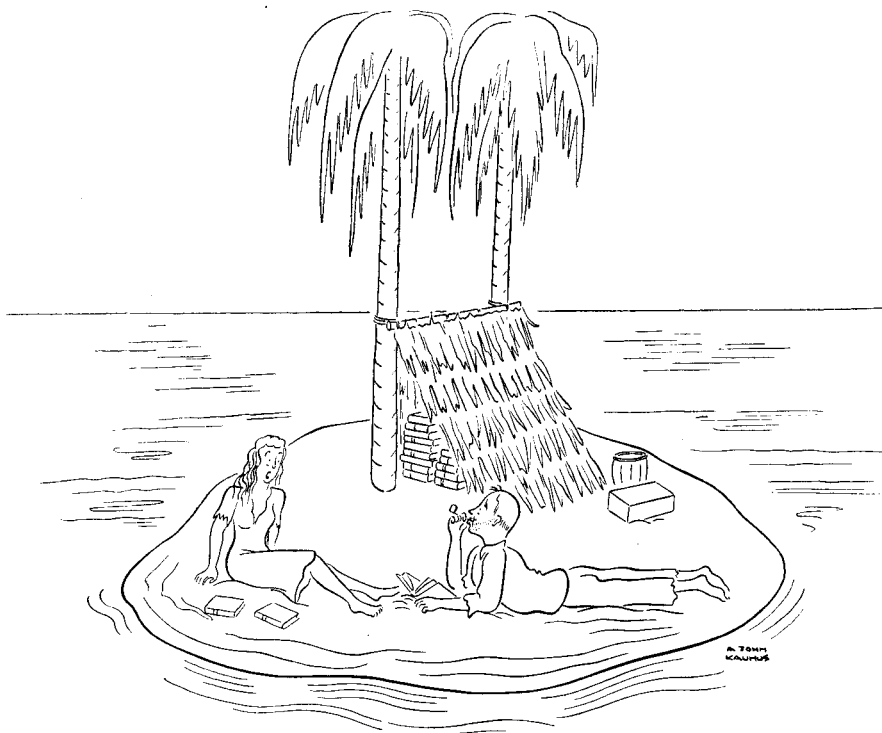
Sedalia, Mo.

William Marion Reedy

SIR:—I am working upon a biography of William Marion Reedy, and am anxious to get in touch with his relatives, and people who knew him or worked with him on *Reedy's Mirror*. I would also like to contact people owning Reedy letters.

FORREST FRAZIER.

Huntsville, Mo.



"I just can't help thinking about the fines at that lending library."

Where Is the Truth?

SIR:—If this controversy over "The Dark Wing" is not a purely private fight, and a mere outsider could edge in, might I venture the opinion that Mr. Cordell is slightly in error when he so airily lumps all Stringer novels as escape-fiction. "The Silver Poppy," which he cites as an example, is certainly not "in the romantic vein of Marion Crawford." "The Wine of Life" was assuredly of a realistic manner which might not have been altogether repugnant to the Faulkners and the Hemingways of today. And that the Stringer novel "Power" (a study of a ruthless railroad magnate) is of the genre of George Barr McCutcheon seems slightly contradicted by a review of that novel which appeared in the pages of *The Saturday Review of Literature* itself. I quote three sentences from it:

"It is a novel that sticks out head and shoulders above the ephemeral, fashionable stories of the day, chiefly because of its conception, its matured understanding and envisagement of life, its breadth and sureness of vision. The philosophy which underlies it reminds one somewhat of the attitude of a Thackeray: an understanding pity for the tragedy of human life, critical, even unsparing yet genial, in no wise impatient or angry, and always seeing things in their due proportions. The execution of the book is also masterly; a triumph of technique, both in its surface finish and its construction."

As the perplexed peddler asked of the barking dog which could still wag its tail: "Which end am I to believe?"

VICTOR LAURISTON.

Chatham, Ontario.

Rome and the Frontier

SIR:—The *S.R.L.* for June 24 contains a letter from F. P. Noble which objects to Elmer Davis's interpretation of the vanishing Roman frontier, in his review of "The New Deal in Old Rome." The writer contends that the vanishing Roman frontier as a cause of the decline of Rome is over-emphasized and not consistent with historical fact. I cannot answer the charge directly, but I can suggest that the glories of Old Rome were to some extent a reflection of her frontier loot, and that the maintenance of the splendor of Rome depended somewhat on the existence of an ever larger lootable frontier. I am aware of the fact that there were existing regions and peoples never brought under Roman domination. Whether these areas were a possible frontier I am not quite certain. I agree that utilization and exploitation of the Roman frontier was a military accomplishment. I think, however, that it is not illogical to assume that there is a point in military conquest at which diminishing returns set in. I think it quite possible that the fall of Rome was caused in part by her loss of frontier.

F. B. HOFFMAN.

Olaa, Hawaii, T. H.