

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## "Weep and Prepare"

SIR:—In his anxiety to condemn "Weep and Prepare," [SRL, Oct. 12] Mr. Louis Untermeyer did not escape the clumsy injury of his own axe: he twice misquoted lines, made one positively untrue statement. The first lines he quotes should have read (the italics indicate the line omitted):

and with an uneasy feeling  
of disaster  
left among the photographs  
of friends

(so I suppose)  
the rancid ashes of the hearth  
and litter of delphinium

(or were  
they roses  
roses—were  
there roses in another room)

I do not consider worth more than mentioning the fact that even in the scope of these lines he twice indicated a pattern of them, by translation of bars to indicate line terminations, which never existed in them. In the third of the quotations, the words "sudden leaves" are misquoted for "sodden leaves," and in the fourth a word is inserted, damaging the sense, the word "our," which I italicize:

the Nails, the Nails pierced *our*  
the Flesh, the Hands—

Incidentally, the quotations were made in an ambiguous fashion, implying a derivation for them obscure to me. May I ask that Mr. Untermeyer be asked to afford the exact passages he supposes to be the derivation of my lines in poems by Eliot, MacLeish, Pound, Cummings?

As for the untrue statement, it is this: "Weep And Prepare" is my *second*, not my *third* book, as Mr. Untermeyer would have it.

RAYMOND E. F. LARSSON.  
Staten Island, New York.

SIR:—(1) I regret the exigency of space which compelled the use of diagonal bars to indicate line divisions.

(2) I regret the not altogether vital omission of the word "and" and the typographical error.

(3) I regret that I thought "Weep and Prepare" was Mr. Larsson's third book instead of, as Mr. Larsson would have it, his second. The acknowledgment page lists four volumes "by the same author." Perhaps we are both poor mathematicians.

(4) Most of all, I regret Larsson's inability to recognize his obligations—obligations in tone and accent rather than exact quotation. I was not alone in discovering his indebtedness to Eliot, Pound, MacLeish, and Cumings. Others added Gerard Hopkins and the Imagists to Mr. Larsson's "influences." But I did not wish—nor do I wish



"It's this way, madam—if you came into the store with \$4.25 and spent one-third of it at the novelties counter, and had 40c left—that's how much this book would cost you."

now—to turn a short review into a bill of particulars.

LOUIS UNTERMAYER.  
Elizabethtown, New York.

## "No Time for Comedy"

SIR:—This is a reply to Mr. Davis's editorial, "No Time for Comedy?," [SRL, November 9].

Regarding Mr. Chaplin's "The Great Dictator," then, I beg leave to disagree with Mr. Davis, who announces that Hitler and the rest of what he terms "the Situation" are "no longer funny." This, according to Mr. Davis, is what ails the Chaplin picture. Now I would be the first to acknowledge that "The Great Dictator" has its faults (and so have Hitler and the Situation), but I object to this arbitrary definition of comedy's subject matter.

A thing is funny if you think it is funny. Mr. Davis does not think the Nazis are funny, even in Mr. Chaplin's inspired misrepresentation of them, and so for Mr. Davis they are not funny. But for me, and for Mr. Chaplin (who of all people takes the menace of the Nazis seriously), the humorous or satirical attitude is supremely enlightening.

No subject is necessarily so solemn, nor is any situation so grim, as to be sacred from the humor of such a talented and tactful clown as Mr. Chaplin. When he sets out to burlesque a Hitler speech, *that speech is funny*—no matter what the tragic consequences of an actual Hitler speech might be. I am of Jewish descent, and I have heard that Mr. Chaplin is of Jewish descent. Neither of us is likely to feel that what the Aryan bully-boys do in the Ghetto is a joke. I am convinced, nevertheless, that satire of the subject is just.

Mr. Davis might be reminded that

current British journalism and folklore make Hitler a target of ribaldry and caricature, and that so far this does not appear to have inhibited their defensive warfare. The author of the recent "Letters from the Corsican" also applied his subtle humor to "Hitler and his doings;" I should like to know Mr. Davis's reaction to that book's barbed irony.

Many of the episodes in "The Great Dictator" which deal with Hitler seem to me to be among the finest achievements of satirical drama. True, the "bubble dance" with the globe is overdone; the pie-throwing scene with Mussolini is likewise too much of a muchness; the peculiar use of Wagner's music, which Mr. Davis admires, is rather questionable; and a number of passages are badly written or performed by inferior actors. Yet the Hitlerian satire, a complete innovation in Chaplin's repertory, is magnificently effective. Mr. Davis admits this, but chooses to call it "essentially . . . tragic." The Ghetto scenes are less effective, not because their subject is intrinsically non-comedic, but because they are not as meaningful nor as competently done.

Swift's essay on a certain economic problem of Ireland advises a disposition of infants which is normally hateful, if not unspeakable. There were Englishmen in his day who said Swift had made a tactical error, but that essay remains a classic of satire. I venture to suggest that Mr. Davis's criticism is equally unfounded.

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## "Water Babies . . ."

SIR:—Basil Davenport surely merits a flood of thanks for his "Water Babies with Plain Water" [SRL, Nov. 16]. I hope that copies marked with red ink have been sent to the editors of the various children's magazines; these periodicals abound in the faults Mr. Davenport deplores and are, generally speaking, woefully inadequate. In one of his essays Stephen Leacock has made one or two of the points of the article, in his own manner and very amusingly.

By the way, what has become of that revived *St. Nicholas*? I can learn nothing whatever about it.

ALICE C. CRAMER.  
Tampa, Florida.

## Literary I. Q.

SIR:—YOUR LITERARY I. Q. DECEMBER 14TH ISSUE QUOTE A SCORE OF 75 OR BETTER IS EXCELLENT UNQUOTE ITS NOT ONLY EXCELLENT ITS A MIRACLE MERRY CHRISTMAS.

THOMAS R. COWARD.

# Mr. Hawthorne Sans Armor

*NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, A MODEST MAN.* By Edward Mather. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company. 1940. 356 pp., with index. \$3.50.

Reviewed by NORMAN H. PEARSON

ENGLISHMAN BITES DOGS best headlines the news of a new biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Not that Edward Mather (a pseudonym, the dust jacket informs, for the heir to an English baronetcy) bites Hawthorne—to the contrary, he pats him and calls him good boy—but he goes straight out after those contemporaries whom he thinks hounded “A Modest Man.” Fear anyone, Mr. Mather implies, but above all fear the women of New England. Elizabeth Peabody, Hawthorne’s sister-in-law, after she had “ratted on poor Bronson Alcott,” sought Hawthorne as a re-entrance fee to the intellectual pound-party at Boston. The father of Margaret Fuller “had his vengeance on life in a curious way: he undertook the education of one of his daughters. . . .” Of Madam Hawthorne, “a more worthless and useless life, except that it produced Nathaniel, is difficult to imagine.” The men were hardly better. “The armor which Hawthorne put on to protect his spiritual virginity against the seductive assaults of Mr. Emerson was perhaps excessive. But Emerson, quite unconscious of Hawthorne’s fears, pursued him for the rest of his life.” “Melville had to run Hawthorne to ground and corner him in a cave before he would make friends.” Only at the close of Hawthorne’s stay in England, when “he discovered how much he liked the aristocracy,” was there apparently any relaxation of Hawthorne’s fear of pursuit. “Alas! the discovery came too late. He had already formed his opin-

ion of England and the English.”

Mr. Mather pulls everything down to matter-of-fact relationships between Hawthorne and the writers of his times. The resulting mundane account brings a useful and fresh picture both of Hawthorne and of New England. The jealousies that are timeless in literary circles have their best telling here. No one who has read Mr. Van Wyck Brooks’s two volumes of New England’s literary history can afford not to read “Nathaniel Hawthorne, A Modest Man.” The two narratives serve as mutual antidotes. Mr. Brooks finds everything in Hawthorne’s time exciting and glorious; Mr. Mather finds the scene stimulating but petty. The life of culture was a competitive business; and if any account by a loving biographer could turn Hawthorne into a hack writer, Mr. Mather’s does.

Mr. Mather excels in his portrayal of this well-known New England scene. In many ways his book is one of the best we have on it. Where Mr. Brooks is simply a fine anecdotist, Mr. Mather writes with wit and acidity of his own. The sketch of Elizabeth Peabody is classical and ought to be missed by no one. There are few personages in the book who do not come embarrassingly to life; far more so, in fact,

than does Hawthorne himself, who, in the role of a modest and shy man, remains quite naturally in the background. Yet this is an indispensable biography for anyone concerned with Hawthorne’s personality. Many have called Hawthorne’s disposition one of happy and romantic aloofness; it might by others be termed a variety of snobbery and nastiness. For there can be no question but that Hawthorne liked very few people, and indulged himself in sarcasm and bitterness at a large majority of the rest.

Why one should bother to write or read a biography of a literary man, which does not in some way relate the man’s life to his work is puzzling. One would hardly gain from Mr. Mather’s account much idea of such a relationship, or even of what Hawthorne wrote. It may be as well, since Mr. Mather’s strongest points are wit and narrative clarity rather than critical lucidity. One illustration may satisfy: “Melville and Hawthorne had this in common, that both based their fiction on a reserve of specialized knowledge.

A life is a life, however; and Hawthorne’s is worth writing about. He has been written about often—and will be. Mr. Mather’s biography follows tradition, and will make precedent. Hawthorne’s body may lie a-mouldering in the grave, but his biographers go marching on.

## Epistolary Net

*A TREASURY OF THE WORLD’S GREAT LETTERS FROM ANCIENT DAYS TO OUR OWN TIME.* Edited by M. Lincoln Schuster. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1940. 563 pp., with index. \$3.75.

Reviewed by  
HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

ALTHOUGH every anthologist is entitled to his own choices, and despite the fact that the canons of “great” letter-writing are undoubtedly hazy, it is difficult to discover precisely what the editor had in mind in this somewhat rambling collection. The names of Cicero, Charles Lamb, Lady Mary Wortley Montague, Horace Walpole, Madame de La Fayette, Jane Carlyle, Flaubert, Dorothy Osborne, and certain other remarkable letter-writers are not included, whereas the volume opens with such purely rhetorical performances as the “exchange of letters” between Alexander and Darius—letters which were, as a matter of fact, manufactured in the fifteenth century by a Persian writer. Letters by Bacon, Stevenson, Zola, Trotsky, Thomas Mann, and one or two others in this collection prove not to be letters in the usual sense of

the word, but rather those public proclamations of which “J’Accuse” is typical. All is fish that comes to Mr. Schuster’s epistolary net; he prints some letters because they are “scarce,” some because they have not been printed before, some because they have been printed in out-of-the-way places, and some because they are on the “right side.” Except for love letters, of which the collection contains a tedious number, the ordinary letter of familiar intercourse is the least conspicuous element in the anthology.

Mr. Schuster writes: “A treasury of such letters is really a treasury of life lived passionately, life disclosed to the uttermost, life set down without fear or inhibition, life brought to a climax, life challenged and critically examined. The dark corridors as well as the loftiest towers in the hall of fame here give up some of their most inviolable secrets.” Well, as Trinculo remarked, “I took him to be killed with a thunderstroke:—but are thou not drowned, Stephano? I hope, now, thou are not drowned.” Rhetoric of this sort is merely grandiose. This anthology seems to me to have no ascertainable governing principle and to be rather jejune.



Edward Mather