

Mr. Farrell Writes a Letter

In Answer to a Young Man Who Wants to Become a Writer

Dear Mr. —

You ask me for advice. Advice is the one thing that I am the least inclined to try and give to anyone. It is seldom of any real assistance. People generally have to find things out for themselves: and this is eminently so in the case of young writers. Therefore, I fear that all I can say to you will merely consist of a few truisms.

In writing, anyone who is sincere and serious should forget about the market and the element of commerce in literature, and he should try to write about the material which he knows best in the most truthful and honest manner that he can. I think that a young writer should read as much as possible, and as widely as he can. One can learn more about the problems of writing from reading about the lives of writers than from the formal treatises on the subject. I should read good biographies of writers, and their lives and letters. I should read particularly, the letters of Chekov and also of Dostoevsky. If you read the lives and the letters of writers you will find that they were often the victim of moods of depression, and they had many apprehensions about their own writing. Joseph Conrad used to read Flaubert, and he would feel that there was no use, and that he might as well not try to write after Flaubert: after Flaubert, he felt that he had nothing to say.

Writing is a lifetime occupation—if one takes it seriously. One lifetime is not too much in which to learn how to write. I would forget about inspiration. If you want to write, and think that you can, I would look at it as a series of problems to be solved—problems which can be solved only by hard work, and a rigid effort to discipline one's self. I think that a young writer should set for himself the task of attaining an objective discipline, and that he should concern himself as much with the effort to gain a sense of what goes on around him, and of how others think, as with his own moods. In setting this task for one's self, I would look to the stories of Maupassant, Chekov, and James Joyce's "Dubliners" as models. James Joyce wrote "Dubliners" in his early twenties: these stories are objective studies of people he knew in Dublin. If you read them, you will see what he observed, what he emphasized, and this should be suggestive to you.

There is one question concerning

writing about which no person can give another advice. If anyone asks—should he be a writer—there is no answer. If he wants to be one, and thinks he can, all the dissuasion in the world will probably not stop him. And if he can't be a writer, nothing will probably make him one. And there is no way in which to find out except by hard work. Writing should be looked upon as hard work, and not as inspiration. Confidence in one's self is gained largely through hard work, and the gaining of self discipline. I think it is necessary to build up habits of discipline, and to try to be free and honest with one's self in one's perceptions, and in one's thinking.

All writers have been influenced by their predecessors, and there is no such thing as absolute originality in writing. It is not plagiarism to assimilate influences, and to learn from one's predecessors.

I think that a young writer should associate with those his own age who

also wish to write. It is better to do this than to try to associate with older writers. Persons your own age meet and face the same problems that you do in their efforts to write. Older persons will be less understanding than you imagine, because they are busy, have their own problems, and their own work. Association with others (those of your own age who wish to write) is very important. You can discuss your mutual problems in such circles much more profitably than you can with older writers. That is the way your own generation will find itself.

Also, I should try to look at objects and environments freshly, and try to see them as clearly as one can. That is part of learning. Writing is a process of learning, and of discovery—self discovery and discovery of the world. It is an adventure in feeling, thinking, and living.

And in writing there are no short cuts. I again state that it is hard work, very hard work if one takes it seriously. A man becomes a writer in a lifetime, not in a day.

Sincerely yours,

JAMES T. FARRELL.

Psychology and Symbolism

THE CRAZY HUNTER. By Kay Boyle. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1940. 295 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HARRY THORNTON MOORE

KAY BOYLE'S three short novels with a Devonshire locale suggest how these years threaten the innocent. Not that there are references to armaments or marching men; the stories are "pre-war." But in each of them living creatures (animal and human) meaning no harm are menaced by forces beyond their control. In the first two stories there are implied rescues because of generosity and love. But in the third these things do not seem to exist: "Big Fiddle" shows how a slow-witted young man may be smashed by circumstantial evidence.

The title story, which comes first, is an interesting addition to the horse fable of these times, which has previously given us the dynamic equine symbols of Roan Stallion and St. Mawr. But Brigand is differently seen: he is a gelding, and then he goes blind. The conflict is provided by the effort of the girl Nancy and her seemingly worthless father, a blighted painter, to save Brigand from the mercy death ordained by Nancy's hunting-gentry mother. Technically the story fits what Paul Heyse named the "Falcon Theory" of the novella—that the short novel should have a

symbol or "silhouette" (as in the "Decameron" falcon story, Day Five, Novella Nine) that will be the dominant and remembered thing—but it is regrettable that Miss Boyle, usually so subtle, has Nancy's father overtly relate the horse-symbol to himself and to various abstractions he and Brigand represent. The story is otherwise excellent, though in the writing itself may be found the occasional lapses which mark the work of expatriates using a language they no longer live in the midst of: obscure words and badly wrenched idioms leave some snags in the text. But these are hardly important amid the essential life of the narrative, the sharpness of the descriptions, and the intensity of the psychological passages, in all of which Kay Boyle is at her very effective best.

The second story, "The Bridegroom's Body," is also a venture into symbolism: it is the story of a woman trapped in a man's community, which is partly suggested by a murdering, vicious old male swan. "Big Fiddle," superbly told in a more traditional vein, moves from Devon to its disturbing conclusion in the bright heat of Capri. Its almost cruel lack of hope may be some presage of the literature of despair we may expect from the war that is now eating its way through Europe.

Bigger Fuse than Bomb

DANGEROUS THOUGHTS. By Lancelot Hogben. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1940. 283 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by IRWIN EDMAN

LANCELOT HOGBEN has a trio of gifts that makes anything he says of interest and generally of importance. He has a genuinely scientific intelligence backed by encyclopedic erudition. He has a consuming social passion. He writes like an angel; an epigrammatic angel with a dash of devilry in him. After publishing two volumes of scientific popularization without nonsense he now gives us (or was perhaps persuaded by his publishers to give us), a series of miscellaneous addresses which have withal a unified theme, "Education for an Age of Plenty."

When a physical scientist popularizes his own scientific studies, one has to defer to his special knowledge. But in this book Professor Hogben takes on all comers. He writes as a citizen, as a human being, and may, therefore, be judged—he would be the last man to deny it—by the standards of humanity and citizenship. On these grounds he must be declared to be for the most part very winning, illuminating, and provocative. He must also be declared, for a smaller part, to be provoking and to sound like a young man who has never got over being a bright young man, a Scotsman who has never got over taunting the English, a physical scientist who has never got over the feeling that Greek culture means Greek grammar and that Greek grammar had better not be studied any more because it is a distraction from the studies that will bring us near a scientific and socially responsible Utopia.

It is worth while to expose one's self to being irritated by Mr. Hogben, for the irritation is caused by a lively mind clearly on the side of the angels. It should be remembered that angels (in that medieval culture which Mr. Hogben so despises) were identical with pure intelligence. He is free from dogmatisms either of the right or the left; he sees around the dialectic fanaticisms of Marxism no less than around the obdurate stupidities of the Tories. His creed is that of scientific humanism, of an education designed to make the conditions of happiness available for all men, in the place of an education and a social order which make a trivial round of anemic pleasures available for the ensconced few at the expense of the poverty-stricken many. The essence of his faith appears in his "Education for an Age of Plenty":

The Adult Education Movement has no need for biology courses of the kind which exist in the universities. What it needs are courses on malnutrition, public health policy, and the revolution of agricultural techniques made possible by recent biological discoveries. It has no need for courses of chemistry and physics on the university model. It needs courses on how an intelligent Government would bring new chemical industries to the depressed areas and how it could mobilize new resources of power. It has no need for elegant expositions of useless literature. It should further the study of language as a means to peaceful communication between nations. It has no need for university economics, university sociology, or university political science. It should be its business to organize courses on the changing structure of industrial management, the recruitment of social personnel, the distribution of income, leisure, and educational opportunities, the powers of local government, the new problems of population growth, the social influence of finance capital. If it demanded such teaching it would widen its popular appeal and it would reinvigorate the teaching of social science in the universities by furnishing them with problems worthy of their resources.

All that is well enough and well enough said. So are many of the things Mr. Hogben has to say about the decadence of "literary" culture. Sensible too, are his observations on the excess of pessimism that are the temporary fatigue induced by despotisms and war. The hope lies in scientific method and the method is still very young.

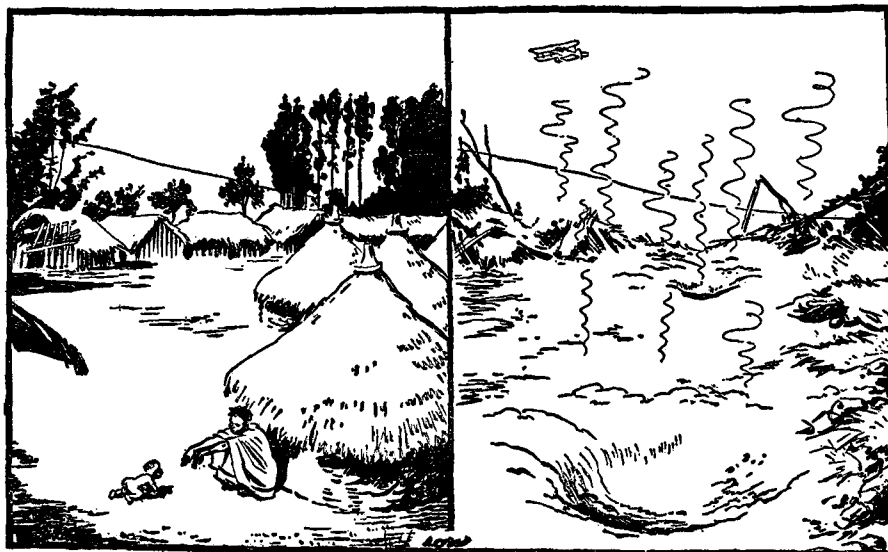
All this being so well said and so important, one wonders why Mr. Hogben himself remains so adolescent and so provincial on other matters. He accuses his humanistic colleagues of boasting that they know nothing about

"science." But he has his own boasts, rather silly ones too. "At forty I am beginning to enjoy the sight of daffodils growing along the Teigne Valley in late March far more than I ever enjoyed in art gallery." He thinks English literature of the last hundred years is concerned with two topics, one of which is "whether a sexually inexperienced young woman of a prosperous class will succeed in compelling a hardworking or handsome young man with insufficient knowledge of contraceptive devices to sign a legal contract of cohabitation." Of course Mr. Hogben hasn't had much time left to read English literature, or literary criticism. For Mr. Richards is the "one honorable exception" he finds to "highly paid or underpaid nonsense among critics and professors."

Mr. Hogben is really too intelligent to be quite so clever. But apparently the smugness of Oxford and Cambridge always drive Scotsmen to exasperation, with the exception of those, and they are numerous, who become the heads of Oxford and Cambridge colleges.

It must be pleasant, by the way, to think one's thoughts are dangerous. There are heretical delusions of grandeur as well as orthodox ones. This is really a very mild and agreeable little book full of pleasant good sense. I hope Mr. Hogben doesn't mind. This reviewer also has had the experience of saying things he has thought were shocking and finding them regarded as gently whimsical. Of course in an age when barbarism occupies high places Mr. Hogben may quite properly regard a plea for intelligence as dangerous. In Germany he certainly would be in a concentration camp.

Irwin Edman is a member of the department of philosophy of Columbia University. He is the author of several books, including "Four Ways of Philosophy," and "Philosopher's Holiday."



Cartoon by Loe from "Europe Since Versailles," published by Penguin Books.

Barbarism

Civilization