



The Right Questions

TWO books of the last year have asked questions which are already reverberating back and forth across the country. The question asked by "The Grapes of Wrath" has been repeated on the screen, it has been amplified on the radio, in an important economic survey, and recently in a series of articles in *The New York Times*. What shall we do with the migratory laborers driven off their homeland by a combination of their own and their ancestors' exploiting of the soil, and by the new exploiting of machines? No satisfactory answer is yet available, and this includes the vague and sometimes sentimental economic humanitarianism offered by Mr. Steinbeck himself. But he has asked the right question, and asked it with the emotional force of a Charles Dickens, whom he often resembles, in a way which will leave its impact upon the American imagination of this generation. Is not this, perhaps, one of the chief purposes of such literature as deals with the problems of human nature—to ask the right questions? And many a question, asked first throughout the centuries in a book, has been answered with that percentage of right over wrong which is the best we can expect in a muddled world responding to drifts of circumstances beneath or beyond its control. Slavery, democracy, the exploiting of children, freedom of thought—questions were asked about all of these in books now classic.

Richard Wright, in his "Native Son," proposes no specific answer except by implication, but he asks a question which none of us who have read the book will forget. He is like the new school of geographers who assert that superior cultural and economic groups inevitably degenerate if they live in close association with underprivileged, exploited, and culturally backward groups upon which they are dependent. The American South, they say, will never catch up with the

rest of the country until it begins to lift the Negro instead of keeping him down. The poor white will stay a poor white until the Negro becomes a better Negro. But they do not say just how it is to be done, being geographers, not politicians, economists, or psychologists. And neither does Mr. Wright, with any conclusive emphasis, in his slowly broadening story of the suppression, the restriction, the inhibition, which turned the most dynamic member of a good family into a "bad nigger." He asks the question, and with such a vigor of piled-up horror and such penetrating and unsentimental sympathy, that we shall be repeating it after him, until the responsibility for some answer becomes obvious to all.

Probably the reason that the so-called proletarian novel of a few years ago failed so lamentably to interest even the leaders of the proletariat, was that it gave all the answers as soon as the questions were raised. Indeed, the reader felt that the writers were more interested in the answers, which were usually Marxian, than in their characters, whose misfortunes seemed designed for a moral, like the incidents in a parable. If the reader doubted the over-simple solution of villainous capital exploiting noble labor, there was nothing else in the book to hold him.

Mr. Wright's and Mr. Steinbeck's novels are very different. "Native Son" is the better organized story:—its swift rise into murder, its ruthless staging of a scene where race prejudice and palpable injustice capture the reader's sympathy, and the refusal of its author to make his chief character anything but a criminal, dangerous to society, all reveal a creative mind of unusual power, discipline, and grasp of large ideas. The question, which first concerns vice and violence and crime, slowly becomes ethical, political, and psychological, without once separating itself from

an intensely human context. Mr. Steinbeck loses his way towards the end of the book (and also in the film story) in a case history of California labor camps, where the great question of what to do about the Joads is obscured by personal rancor against individuals whose motives, and the deep-lying circumstance behind them, are insufficiently presented. But he saves his story for the category of great questioning books by the humor of the very human Joads, by the constructive idealism of Mrs. Joad, and by the intimate tie between the Joads and all of us which he never lets us forget. Thus both books can safely endure the criticism,—well, what are we to do about it? Theirs not to reason why, but to ask great questions. Both books can endure the charge of exaggeration, or partiality, for both are convincing in their impression of reality. Bigger, though Mr. Wright says he has known intimately many Biggers, may be a special case, but the reader who flinches at his completely unmoral self-assertion, has to believe in the convincing truth to experience of the portrait.

It is not enough, of course, to ask the right questions, yet to ask them is a great service to civilization. It is a service that the writer with a really creative imagination is especially fitted to perform. If he turns propagandist, all that happens is that he has become more interested in getting votes for an answer, than in the significance of his question and the impact on the imagination of his way of asking it. Swift was no economist, Milton was not a great statesman, Dickens did not understand the industrial revolution, yet the questions they asked rose to the burning point, and kept rising again. If literature, *belles lettres*, to use the worst term that can be applied to it in an age that regards itself as realistic, could do no more than that, it would be at least as valuable as history. H. S. C.

What Is This Thing Called Time?

By Evelyn Engle

WHAT is this thing called time, by man devised
To make an order which he seemed to need?
Star light and sunlight at the first comprised
His day, his stomach told him when to feed.
He cut the day in two and quartered it
Long before fractions occupied his mind,
Until at last he called these segments hours. By bits
He measured these with sundials of a kind.

'Till now we wind our watches twice a day
And set our Telechron by radio;
We rise by bell at seven, ride the subway,
And start our work at nine for So-and-so,
Rush home at five and have an hour to play.
What is this thing called time that ticks away?

Letters to the Editor

Lucy and Toast

SIR:—I am afraid that I cannot agree with Mr. Davis's conclusion that Dr. Watson's American origin is disposed of by that idle speech of "the child Lucy." For three reasons:

1. Dr. Watson is so domestically and dietetically dumb that I could believe he fancied that buckwheat cakes were boiled.

2. The mistake in the use of the word "toasted" may have been the child Lucy's.

3. There is no reason why "toasted" as an adjective could not be used of food cooked on a griddle, it has been used of cooking in a fire—for instance, Dr. Bullinger, at the beginning of the 17th century, arraigns King Nebuchadnezzar for his wish "to toast the three children."

This generic use of the word "toast" is old-fashioned but, as we know, America fortunately preserves the use of words that are obsolete in England.

R. ELLIS ROBERTS.

Baltimore, Maryland

Mr. Burton's "A. S. D."

SIR:—It does not seem to me that your reviewer B. R. R. did justice to the new book "And So Dedicated." To begin with let me say that the book left a very sour taste in my mouth, but since this was the taste calculated by the author apparently and since the effect was obtained from the corruption inherent in the theme, it is no flaw in authorship.

"This sensational novel is a remarkable jumble of bad writing, sophomoric thinking and slovenly reporting." So to B. R. R. it quite probably is—the answer is that so was the decade 1920-30, the spirit of which Mr. Burton has attempted to convey. It may be undisciplined and youthful, but there is certainly nothing slovenly about it. The mere degree of creative energy necessary for such glittering virtuosity precludes slovenliness of any serious kind.

The book is decidedly irreverent, perhaps somewhat carelessly so. For example, to make the bald statement that Lincoln ran from the Capitol at the approach of Early's soldiers is by itself a misrepresentation of Lincoln's character; but it is ameliorated by the fact that the circumstance is not used as a basis for any contention on the author's part. Besides, the book has a sort of consistency, homogeneity of its own in the matter of such partial statements: we are to understand and accept them as such. The attitude of the book is one of deep, confirmed disillusionment, but not of cynicism as regards all possible futures. That is the life of it—the unexpressed but un-failing faith in man. Man must change,

is the verdict; no system will change him, no doctrine as such; but this much is certain, that the root of his evil is self-seeking. Self-seeking destroys the best elements in man and in society. The predominantly good-willed are eliminated.

Of course "And So Dedicated" is a "synthetic product," as your reviewer aptly puts it. The fact that it achieves a synthesis of the discordant elements implicit in its theme indicates a wide knowledge and steady vision on the part of its maker. Burton has the power to heighten and vivify all that he touches. The most casual events of life are made to glow with potential excitement. He regards everything more intensively, particularly, imaginatively than the ordinary writer and so gives us a sense of essence. If he exults a little in what he sees—well, we can exult with him.

On more academic grounds, Mr. Burton has both defects and virtues. His plot is chaotic, perhaps intentionally, and the whole does not seem to be blessed with a perfect form. Quite a good many pages before the end of the book the hero and the girl in preparation for heroine are eliminated in a most sanguine way. This is not only a brutal blow to the hopes of the reader, but it leaves the rest of the story to go into a prolonged decline. There is no character left strong enough to focus our interest. As B. R. R. points out, the two slips on the name "Fern" constitute a grave error of editorship, but a venial one as regards artistic effectiveness. Undoubtedly they will be mended in future editions.

I think there will be future editions. In spite of its plot-form flaws the narrative is compelling. It never lets us alone, but keeps us reading greedily to the end. Most of the characters are rather under-accentuated, though they convince us of their reality. Some of them—Jewell, Sidney Wynner and Ronnie, for example—are highly detailed portraits on the dark side.

Mr. Burton is a wayward genius whom it will be hard to digest. But digest him we will have to if he develops along the lines suggested in "And So Dedicated."

J. M. HOWARD.

Gary, Indiana.

Llewelyn Powys

SIR:—Alyse Gregory, widow of Llewelyn Powys, is collecting his letters for publication. She begs that anyone having letters send them to me for forwarding to England. All originals will be promptly copied and returned.

AGNE DE LIMA.

519 W. 121st St.
New York City.

Presidential Bibliophile

SIR:—I am preparing a book on Thomas Jefferson as a book collector, bibliophile, and critic, and would welcome any information or correspondence concerning this matter.

WILLIAM H. PEDEN

Box 524,
University of Maryland,
College Park, Md.



"Bumps-a-daisy!"