



NO TIME FOR POETRY?

IT may be wondered why *The Saturday Review*, at a time such as this, should put special stress on poets and poetry. The stampede back to the Dark Ages is gaining size and momentum, and some may feel that this is hardly the occasion for literary refinements; indeed, some may consider it a fair question to ask whether poets and writers might not be of greater service right now in defense factories sewing together parachutes or fastening bomb racks onto planes.

No one can deny that it takes something more than a quatrain to stop a seventy-ton tank dead in its tracks. But though the wave of the future will be too crowded with buckles and bonds to permit of anything as unfettered and creative as poetry—including perhaps even the accomplished verse from the same pen that gave it its name—it would be foolish to say that just because the language of poetry is beyond the ken of the opposing forces that it has no place or value for us. This very inability of the wave to fathom or sustain poetry should in itself be enough cause for us to relish it and prize it all the more.

Poetry can hardly be without some use today when it can be called on by the leaders of free culture in order to express, as Wordsworth put it, the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." It is no coincidence that the chief executives of the democratic states have thus on several memorable occasions quoted from poetry while the chief executioners of the totalitarian states have never strayed beyond bombast. It is difficult to imagine a more awkward place for poetry than in the mouths of Herrs Hitler, Goering, and Goebbels—even including passages from the Nibelungenlied or from Tyrtaeus, whose stanzas ought to have enough kill-your-neighbor spirit for any dictator. On the other hand, who among those listening some weeks ago to the overseas broadcast of the Brit-

ish Prime Minister can soon forget the use of the historic quotation from Longfellow sent to Mr. Churchill by the President as a message of hope and faith:

... Sail on, O Ship of State,
Sail on, O Union, strong and great.
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!

And only last Sunday, the Prime Minister ended a moving talk with a passage from Arthur Hugh Clough's "Say Not the Struggle Naught Avail-eth":

For while the tired waves, vainly
breaking,
Seem here no painful inch to
gain;
Far back, through creeks and in-
lets making,
Comes silent, flooding in, the
main.
And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in
the light;
In front the sun climbs slow, how
slowly!
But westward, look, the land is
bright!

Even as Mr. Churchill uttered these words, a newly unfurled swastika hung over the Acropolis, marking the latest advance of the philosophy of the sledge-hammer, and dramatizing as never before the nature of the struggle, as moving mountains of steel ground down the sacred soil on which democracy first grew. It was here that poetry received not only its name but recognition and distinction as the highest of the arts. But somewhere in Athens, perhaps on the plains of Marathon, the legions of the jackal will come across a passage from Alcaeus that has lived twenty-five hundred years:

What constitutes a State?
Not high-raised battlement or la-
boured mound,
Thick Wall or moated gate;
Nor cities fair, with spires and
turrets crowned:
No!—Men, high-minded men . . .
Men who their duties know,
Know too their rights, and know-
ing, dare maintain;
Prevent the long-aimed blow,
And crush the tyrant, while they
rend the chain.

N. C.

Cotton Fever

By Fred Ross

'LONG the road on either side,
Cotton's green and two miles wide,
Fields fan out in rows string-straight
An' a boll flings out his fleecy bait
An' grins at me an' seems to say,
"You'll be grabbin' at me one day
At six bits a hunderd weight!"

Then the bolls start rustlin', shoutin' in the air,
Just like as if they was callin' off a square:
"Chase that possum, chase that coon,
Chase that cotton-boll roun' the moon.
Crawl down a row an' stan' up straight
On a six-bit whirl fer a hunderd weight.
You can live on the lan' till the day you die
Jus' as long as you leave when the crop's laid by.
So hunker on along an' grabber all aroun'—
Payin' the man for the use of his groun';
Lint's stacked up in a record yield,
Gin's chuck full, so gin 'er in the field.
So pick 'er on down to the end in the gloam,
Then pick up yer sack an' promenade home;
Meet yer baby, pat him on the head;
Feed him on beans an' a piece of corn-bread.
When you go back yonder he'll go freight
At jus' six-bits a hunderd weight."

An' so I mosey down the hill,
Cotton bolls a callin' still:
"At Long Row's End, de Boss Man wait,
Nail you up in a wooden crate;
At six-bits a hunderd livin's hard,
By dyin's dear in the county-yard,
At twenty-five bucks a hunderd weight!"

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Adjectives and Whodunits

SIR:—In your issue of April 5, Judge Lynch, the scintillating appraiser of whodunits, turns the statistics on those of the last quarter. 91 were published, he says, including the Ghastly, the Unmentionable, Eleven. Of the total "about 20 per cent is really good stuff." Statistics are unreliable; he says so, and I believe it. But I am tempted to turn them back on him. For I have often wondered, as my eye ran over his choice and varied epithets, seldom two alike, how so many current mysteries can be so good. Can the level of these fly-by-nights, here today and gone tomorrow, really be so high? Let us look.

In the *SRLs* of last January, February, and March Judge Lynch placed 70 titles in his coveted boxes. (Yes, I know that the novels published in those months may not be the same as those he reviews during the same time, but there should not be much difference.) Ergo, he names only the best, and leaves out not only the Ghastly Eleven, but other mediocrities. Well and good; but yet, 20 per cent of 91 is 18.2. Does he give high praise to only 18? Not so; by my reckoning, he rates 30 titles outstanding. At least, I should say that when a novel earns such a term as "Class A," "For connoisseurs," "Extra Good," "Stellar honors," "High grade," "Commendable," "Good thriller," "Top drawer," "Yes, sir," etc., etc., it is "really good stuff." By my reckoning, also, only some 14 of his qualifiers indicate something average to poor.

Now, I understand perfectly that Judge Lynch avoids mention of the items he would rank as "punk," "stale," "fishy," if he stooped to use such terms. Enough that he must read them; he has a right to dodge, along with libel suits, the insipid chore of typing out their titles. But does not the Judge's enthusiasm run away with his severity? 30 per cent high quality? He is not Judge Lynch, he is Master Goodheart.

Now, I myself am no judge of whodunits. I seldom read them, finding other diversions more entertaining and relaxing. I drive a car in traffic to quiet my nerves, and usually put myself to sleep with a copy of *The Nation*. Mysteries have been running so long that the search for an unused solution leads very far from possible reality. So I am the last person to challenge Judge Lynch. I should not raise the little issue at all, did it not seem to me a microcosm of the whole world of book-reviewing.

If we run through a few issues of the *SRL* of five years back, of ten years back, what do we find? One novel after another rated as "splendid," "soundly philosophic," "surely the best of the year"; the historical works are "exciting and significant," the travelogues "monumental efforts."



"Mark my words, there's something phoney about all this."

Where are these titles now? Does this country actually produce so many masterpieces that they drop into oblivion by the score? Or are reviewers loath to apply universal standards to what arrives at their desks? Certainly they are entitled to pass in silence over the weakest. But also, your subscriber is entitled to a genuinely critical guide.

S. G. MORLEY.

Berkeley, Calif.

Movies and History

SIR:—Your magazine recently published a very timely letter by Oswald Garrison Villard criticising the picture "Santa Fe Trail," which greatly misrepresented the life of John Brown. It is to be hoped that Mr. Villard and many others will continue to raise their voices in a mighty protest against the distortion of historical figures and facts in the pictures. So many great people and events in history have been so grossly misrepresented. This, in a measure, is most dangerous to the young, who often get an impression which will be as lasting as it is false. To the grown ups it is nothing less than an insult to their intelligence and education to see a historical picture which is a very poorly presented history lesson to say the least. Educational groups should put this protest into real action and demand that history and people should be presented with truth. Is it possible that the picture producers do not know that truth is not only stranger than fiction but far more dramatic?

(MRS.) FLORENCE MUNSAN.

Jersey City, N. J.

Show of Hands, Please

SIR:—I guess no one has said anything about it because there is a fear he may be alone in his ignorance, but I see no point in kidding ourselves any further—the *SRL* Literary I. Q. quiz is too difficult, and it's about time all of us came out into the open and admitted it. I'm not the literary moron these quizzes make me out to be and I'm sure the same holds true for my fellow readers, if only they wouldn't be afraid to say so.

FRANKLIN YOUNG.

Cambridge, Mass.

Information, Please

SIR:—I am writing a book about Clyde Fitch and the New York of his time. I am especially anxious to get in touch with people who may have known Mr. Fitch socially, or worked with him in his productions. I am also eager to get a fuller list of theses that may have been written about him, and letters that may have been unpublished.

NEWTON TAYLOR.

New York City.

SIR:—I wonder if you could help me run down this quotation: "A republic if we can keep it." I think Willkie used this in his campaign and that he said Franklin said it during or after the Constitutional Convention. I am not interested in whether Willkie used it. I want to find out whether Franklin said it, when he said it, and where, and how.

FLORENCE SELBY.

Eagle, Idaho.