



USEFULNESS AND THE WRITER

HOWARD MUMFORD JONES makes an interesting and well-pointed complaint in his article in this issue when, after referring to Carl Sandburg as a "useful" writer who "dwells in a public world accessible to anyone who can read," he states it as his opinion that unless literature is to be useful in this sense, it is "likely to degenerate into an elaborate private game played with infinite relish by a selected few, but a game without general significance to the United States."

This is interesting not only because of its obvious validity, but because it is no less a truism today than it was 2000 years ago, when Aristophanes protested against what he called the "traitors to the stage." Progress there has been, certainly; but the big job before the writer today, as it always has been, is still to increase, as Mr. Jones calls it, his usefulness and accessibility. This is not a matter of writing-down, or of forced condescension. It is a matter, first, of awareness and sympathetic understanding; after that—but only after that—it becomes a matter of technique by which the writer may be understood. For the technique is important only in relation to the message and the image behind it.

A generous number of examples might be cited of contemporary writers who have achieved this balance of usefulness, but it is doubtful whether even our own age—and this is not restricted to American literature—can boast of three writers who could outshine Whitman, Tolstoy, and Heine in the art of understanding and being understood. At first glance this may seem a strange combination, but what each had in common with the other was a dislike of the extraneous, particularly as it referred to literature and literary criticism; all three of them—and they were contemporaries—were deeply concerned with the problems of the times in which

they lived; and all three of them stood apart from those of their colleagues who, though recognizing the issues of the day, did little to bring themselves within reach of those who needed their help. Perhaps this is what caused Whitman to write in his "Democratic Vistas":

Literature, strictly considered, has never recognized the people, and whatever may be said, does not today. Speaking generally, the tendencies of literature, as hitherto pursued, have been to make mostly critical and querulous men. It seems as if, so far, there were some natural repugnance between a literary and professional life, and the rude rank spirit of the democracies. . . . I know nothing more rare, even in this country, than a fit scientific estimate and reverent application of the People—of their measureless wealth of latent worth and capacity, their vast, artistic contrasts of lights and shades. . . .

It is only the accident of geography that separates Whitman from Tolstoy and Heine; but their blood relationship in the family of ideas transcends nationalities and physical superficialities. This despite the rather curious paradox that Whitman was as intensely American as any American writer before or since; just as Tolstoy and Heine represent the quintessence of the true Russian spirit and the true German spirit respectively. Their real and essential similarities are in abundant evidence in all their works.

In "What Is Art?" Tolstoy seems almost as though he might be writing an introduction to "Democratic Vistas"—especially that portion of Whitman's work dealing with the seclusiveness of writers—when he says:

For a work to be esteemed good, and to be approved of and diffused, it will have to satisfy the demands, not of a few people living in identical and often unnatural conditions, but it will have to satisfy the demands of all those great masses of people who are situated in the natural conditions of laborious life. And the artists producing art will not be, as now, merely a few people selected from a small section of the nation . . . but will consist of all those gifted members of the whole people who prove capable of, and are inclined towards, artistic activity.

And when Heinrich Heine speculated on posterity's opinion of him, he said he didn't know whether he deserved that "a laurel-wreath should one day be laid on my coffin" for his verses, because he never attached any great value to poetical fame. And yet:

. . . lay on my coffin a sword; for I was a brave soldier in the Liberation War of humanity.

It is perhaps significant that both posterity in general and writers in particular now see in the work not only of Heine but of Whitman and Tolstoy a level of achievement in their service to humanity that is eminently worth emulating. N. C.

My Very Young Son

By Sara Kolb Danner

"WERE, I are, I be tomorrow,"
My young son's verbs are fluid, flowing,
But soon grammar will dam them up
With the rigid wall of knowing.

Will knowledge tutor this rhythm away
And leave his singing cold and dark
Which now mounts the aerial stair
As glad and free as a lark?

His pencil he holds like a fishing rod
And the flowing line is both bait and quarry.
His own bizarre, untempered stroke
Is very free and starry.

His mind can float like a changing cloud
And drift along in lovely fancy
Before the sun of life and years
Burn up its necromancy.

My young son runs like a leaping flame
His grace like a faun's is swift and nimble
Perpetual motion with running ease
Is a young's boy's symbol.

Poised on a surf board on a cobalt wave
He shall ride through the buffeting years
And laughingly blow into the sun
My spindrift of fears.

The Traveling Library

SIR:—Somewhat late I have come upon the notes in *Trade Winds* of your issue of July 12 which refer to the library at Haddon Hall at Atlantic City. They brought to mind my surprise earlier this Summer at finding an inviting little library on the few shelves of the club car of a Canadian Pacific Railway train on which I traveled to the Canadian Rockies. There were, of course, a number of best sellers present but they were *good* best sellers and not all the volumes available were quite such obvious choices. In thousands of miles of American train travel I do not recall such an attractive library. In fact, with one exception, I don't recall any books at all!

RICHMOND B. WILLIAMS.
Brooklyn, New York.

Ti Ti Ti Tum

SIR:—In connection with the V for Victory campaign perhaps your readers may be interested in the fact that the rhythm of the Morse V, three shorts and a long, is not only the rhythm of Beethoven's Fate knocking at the door, but also constitutes a foot, the paeon quartus, which Æschylus uses in the Oresteia as a kind of Wagnerian motif for the Furies, the spirits of justice and punishment. The use of this foot begins as early as the first chorus, where it is woven in with other measures to suggest the idea of retribution; and reaches its climax in the last act, in a chorus known as the Binding Song, when the Furies dance round Orestes, casting over him a hypnotic incantation, with a refrain based on the insistent "ti ti ti tum ti ti ti tum." May the omen be fulfilled! Hitler to the Furies!

BASIL DAVENPORT.
New York, N. Y.

"Exotic"

SIR:—Pity on a poor overworked word—"exotic." Every newspaper writer who wishes to show off his vocabulary manages to squeeze that word into his particular product.

One of the writers of contract-bridge columns relates that an alleged "expert," on self-constituted "authority," makes "exotic" bids. Meaning "fake," "guide," or "informatory" bids, designed to mislead the adversaries.

Why so much "exotic?"

WHIDDEN GRAHAM.
New York, N. Y.

"Slow Movement"

SIR:—High time it seems to me for someone who liked Virginia Hamilton's poem "Slow Movement," published in the July 12 issue, to write and say so. Mr. Holmes and other correspondents may have their opin-



"Fine camper you turned out to be! Sixteen books and no coffee pot."

ions but to me it is an eminently satisfactory composition and no more obscure than some poetry by Browning, Emerson, and Edwin Arlington Robinson. I'll trade a dozen of your more explicit poems for another one like this.

DAVID PAINE, M.D.
Waltham, Massachusetts.

Information, Please

SIR:—I am interested in all material relative to the island of Martinique, particularly as regards its legendary and social history. Will you please ask your readers to put me in touch with any possible correspondence or old documents of any kind, which might prove of interest in the book I am contemplating on the subject.

SOPHIE L. GOLDSMITH.
140 West 58th Street,
New York, N. Y.

L'Affaire Safian

SIR:—Now that Messrs. L. B. Jones and Barry Corde have taken their fling at me in the *SRL* for August 30, could I enter my two cents worth in the fray and settle the whole matter?

Mr. Jones writes that most of his "generation was well furnished, not to say overstocked, with Longfellow's lyrics." Let me add that I am *not* a member of Mr. Jones's generation. I am a sixteen-year-old high school senior whose only experience with H.W.L. was the study of "Evangeline" way back in the eighth grade. Times

change, and poetic diets change with them.

And now to answer Mr. Corde's query on the number of readers awake at the literary switch. To date I have received thirty-four replies of varying tone: detached, condescending, pedagogical, jovial. One was sent by a descendant of the Poet, Mr. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana, of Cambridge, Mass. Coupled with the fifty-three directed to the *SRL* editors, the total falls just short of one hundred. (Enough, Mr. Corde?) The number, however, is rather lame next to Mr. Jones's estimated fifty-thousand!

STANLEY SAFIAN.
Long Beach, N. Y.

Dep't of Correction

SIR:—Just to satisfy my curiosity, won't you let me know how many letters you receive telling you that in the July 26, *SRL*, page 18, Bigger Thompson in the quiz answers should have been Bigger Thomas?

I wrote to Macmillan some months ago pointing out two errors in a single paragraph of one of their books, and they told me that one of the errors—calling Jeeter Lester, Lester Jeeter, had already been pointed out by scores of readers. On the other hand they said that I was apparently the only person in the country who had noticed that other error—putting down Erskine Caldwell's book "Trouble in July" as "Trouble in August."

ALBERT GOLDSTEIN.
New Orleans, La.