

The Return to the Grand Manner

"An Heroic Age Calls for Heroic Expression"

DOROTHY THOMPSON

THESE comments are prompted by an observation which I made to myself on reading Russell Davenport's "My Country"; namely, that five years ago Mr. Davenport would not have written it, and that five years ago the critics would have rent it to ribbons, as "overwritten," "hortatory," and "bombastic." That observation would be coupled with the fact that this work, a poem, of all things, is selling at the rate of 2000 copies a week, and being devoured by students, workers, and business men, who read it, as I did, with tears suffusing their eyes, and a great well of gratitude rising in their hearts.

There are other things going on worthy of observation. At the opening of the Salon D'Automne in Paris, after the liberation, young Parisian artists screamed against Picasso's paintings, "Explain! Explain!" What was it that they wanted that great artist to explain? Obviously, it seems to me, why, after the agony of France, he should go on painting as he had done before. Guernica was a break; an attempt of the modern genius to depict on canvas a terrible expression of the face of life. But Picasso came back to a people whose inner as well as outer lives had been uprooted through terrible griefs and fears with the same esoteric brilliance of his pre-war and pre-occupation days. And it was inadequate.

If I may take another illustration from outside the realm of art, I myself delivered a speech in the recent campaign which was, as the saying is, a sensation. I believe that it elicited demands for more than half a million copies and that the demand is still not exhausted. Yet I could not, and would not, have made that speech five years ago. What moved people, and apparently profoundly, was not the first part of it, which was as factual as a lawyer's brief, and reasonable and truthful I hope, but the latter part, which was the expression of a profound and sincere emotion about a weary and overburdened man, and many weary, overburdened, and suffering people. I "dared"—and, upon



Mr. Churchill's speeches have the aroma of the time of England's greatest grandeur.

reflection, it took daring, though I was not conscious of it at the time—to use that form of expression which used to be called "oratory," and which has been all but banned from the platform and the microphone for nearly a full generation.

If we cast our eyes upon the Soviet Union we can observe similar things going on. Under the siege of Leningrad, Shostakovitch wrote his seventh symphony, which has since then become one of the most powerful expressions in art of the war, not only for Russians, but for all the peoples of the United Nations. Yet this symphony, so expressive of our age, records a return to the traditional, the emotional, and the "grand line."

IN the dreadful, titanic, searing experience of invasion and struggle, death and destruction, the purely intellectual structure which the early communist leaders attempted to put under the new state has proved utterly inadequate. Russia has resurrected heroes, many of them anathema to Marx, many of them anathema in the schoolbooks on which a whole generation of Russian youth has been reared. It will be recalled from

the "Diary of a Russian School-boy" that he expressed himself as "spitting on those old Czars" from, as I recall it, a then non-existent twentieth story. Yet today Peter the Great, Ivan IV, and Catherine the Great are all, again, national heroes, greatly to the concern of many of our own radicals. One may share their concern lest these resurrections from the past lead to reaction. But they record again a hunger after the grand, the large, the sense of timeless continuity and historical destiny, without which the agonies of the present would be unendurable.

These illustrations, which I take casually from what is closest at hand, are symptoms of fundamental change. They will be decried by many left-wingers, as signs of retrogression. But these very people display in their own attitudes a curious contradiction. On the one hand, they are working for a "People's Democracy," for a wider participation of the masses in all phases of our social and economic life. At the same time, they cling to those very expressions of art that never have had, and never can have, any mass response. Actually art has never been so divorced from the life of the masses of the people as in the last generation. Poets have written poetry for other poets, painters have painted pictures for other painters—and for dealers—and the art of the people has been swing adaptations of great musical themes—and the comics and the movies.

It is odd that the most esoteric art has called itself "revolutionary." It has never been revolutionary but for the most part epicene, introverted, and, at most, rebellious—though rebellion and revolution are not the same thing, by any manner of means. Gertrude Stein has never written a revolutionary poem, because nothing ever written by her could move a heart or quicken any but an esoteric mind. All revolutionary art abandons art for art's sake and makes art for Life's sake. The art called radical by the radicals is actually sterile, stripped of the very essence of art.



Dmitri Shostakovich symbolizes the grand manner in the symphony.

It has been clever, expert, intellectual, decorative, small, and ivory tower. It has scorned the grand line; it has shrunk away from virility; it has shivered away with snooty distaste from every great theme—"the dancing stars, the daedal earth, heaven, and the giant wars, and life, and death, and birth." It has refused to make a yes a yes, and a no a no.

The revolt against the intellectual and the "intelligensia," among whom has been included the artist, has been a striking feature of the counter-revolutionary movements of our days, a leading aspect of fascism. The intellectual and the artist have cried loudly, and pointed scornful fingers. But they should rather have examined themselves. The reactionary hatred toward them of the masses is the hatred felt toward those who cut from underneath man the props of his faith. Life is hard, bitterly hard, and Death is harder and more bitter. The world is an inferno, in which eyeless, heartless, soulless robots consume in shattering explosions the household, the shrine, the photographs of one's mother, and the body of a living child. A man, so young that life sings in his veins like wine, his eyes fixed in the wary stare of the offensive, is a silhouette and a flame and is no more at all. Grief presses a stone upon millions of hearts, as millions of Rachels weep for their lost sons. Who shall interpret our experience to ourselves, if it be not the artist, the poet, the seer? Shall he tell a mother that her son is a nicely balanced compound of chemical substances? Or that Religion is an Opiate of the People? Or that three green apples contain the universe?

The patter of the salons and the literary teas; the expertise of the guides in the galleries, explaining in

tones superiorly modulated the psycho-analytic meanings of an esoteric work, the psychologists, toting up Man in statistically noted reactions, and spread over all the anodyne—the true Opiate of the People—commercialized movies, peppy radio programs, boogie-woogie music—all combine to bury the soul deeper than the deepest shell-hole, and tell mankind that the meaning of his agony is meaningless.

All great art speaks to the soul and tells man of his grandeur. All great art is purgative and releasing. It is eyes for eyes that see not, and a tongue for those who speak not. Throughout the ages the affirmation to the artist has been "That is what I saw but did not see; that is what I felt but could not say." Whitman—"overblown, bombastic"—said, of poetry, and the function of the poet in America:

The poems distilled from other poems will pass away. The expectation of the vital and the great can only be satisfied by the demeanor of the vital and the great. . . . The soul of the proudest nation may go half-way to meet that of its poets. . . . The proof of the poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.

And he said, too:

The direct trial of him who would be the greatest poet is today. If he does not flood himself with his immediate age as with vast oceanic tides . . . if he does not attract his own land body and soul to himself and hang on its neck with incomparable love . . . and if he be not himself his age transfigured . . . let him merge in the general run and await his development.

And:

Whatever satisfied the soul is truth. The prudence of the greatest poet answers at last the craving and glut of the soul. . . . The soul has never been once fooled and never can be fooled.

And:

The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and what is. He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet . . . he says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you. He learns the lesson. He places himself where the past becomes the present.

The whole of this remarkable essay should be read again—the Introduction to the 1857 edition of "Leaves of Grass"—to find an exposition of the nature of really revolutionary art. It is revolutionary of life, not of itself.

It does not withdraw itself from life or the people, but fortifies itself through them. Nor does it descend to the people to give them what it thinks they want, nor cheapen itself in their



Russell Davenport's poem is selling at the rate of 2000 a week.

behalf, but speaks to them in the noblest language it can command, saying, as it were, I will be as great before you as I have it in me to be great, because I am of you and respect you.

And at all times the Grand Line attracts the masses, unless they have been utterly corrupted by sugary anodynes. A People's Art was on the walls of the cathedrals of the High Middle Ages, and in their stones, for it was an art glorifying God and Man in God, and it obtained a response of gratitude, reverence, love, and awe. It depicted people as they are, but with the sublimation of something over and above, something transcendental—something they could be. The grand line inspires to aspiration.

THE speeches of Churchill in "England's darkest hour" recapture the sonorous line; the rhythm of the King James version, the aroma of the time of England's greatest grandeur. An heroic age calls for an heroic expression.

Everywhere there is a hunger of the people to know what it is they live by, and a yearning, however unconscious, for a vision of the future. When the President delivered his Boston speech, which was full of sharp and witty remarks, the great crowd assembled in the open air, laughed, and responded with quick appreciation. But at the end of his speech he changed his tone, and spoke with clear fervor of the American past and future.

Peace [he said], no less than war, must offer a spirit of comradeship, achievement, unselfishness, and an indomitable will to victory.

We in this country, for generations, have waged war against the wilderness, against the mountains and the rivers, against droughts and storms, against oppression and in-

tolerance, against poverty, against disease. . . .

I say we must wage the coming battle for America and for civilization on a scale worthy of the way we have waged this war against tyranny and reaction, and wage it through all the difficulties and disappointments that may ever clog the wheels of progress. . . .

I say we must wage a peace to attract the highest hearts, the most competent hands, and brains.

That is the conception I have of the meaning of total victory. . . . And that conception is founded on Faith—Faith in the unlimited destiny, the unconquerable spirit, of the United States of America.

An eye-witness told me that through this passage, this testimony of utter faith, and this picture of the great Battle for Civilization to be waged in peace, the people stood in spellbound silence looking up at the President with rapt attention, and at the end the applause was a roar. Why? Because in that moment the President had spoken for them what they wanted, and needed, to hear—what they needed to fill the spiritual vacuum which thirty years of cynicism and four years of most terrible war had blasted in their lives. And he spoke in the grand manner, not in a fireside talk or report, but to a living community of men and women, reaching out to each other, unconsciously, groping out to each other, and to him, for comfort and sustenance.

The age through which we fight in so much sweat and blood and tears will either be terribly and beautifully great or terribly and dreadfully disillusioned. It will produce the poets and the artists who hang upon its neck with incomparable love, or it will produce another lost generation of broken and cynical men. The challenge to the gifted, to the genius, to the re-creator was never so great. The stature and dimensions of the age, with all its griefs and fears, demand the artists who can embrace them in full, yet disciplined, emotion. "The coward will surely pass away. It is not intellect that is to be the poet's warrant and welcome. . . . The swarms of the polished, deprecating, and polite float off and leave no remembrance. Only toward as good as itself, and toward the like of itself, will the nation advance half way."

America will have a renaissance in all the forms of art, or her artists and intellectuals will have proved unworthy of her.

Then let them beware.

For where the poets and artists prove unworthy and without understanding of the state of the nation's soul they are destroyed out of an unconscious sense of betrayal, and in their destruction is the threat of the destruction of the nation itself.

Balancing the Books for 1944

An Accounting of Literary Debits and Credits

AMY LOVEMAN

PSYCHOLOGISTS, perhaps, rather than literary historians will have to determine why it is that in a year in which the war and post-war problems have taken first place in the interests of the reading public the book which has dwarfed all others in popularity as 1944 sweeps to its close is a historical novel. Kathleen Winsor's "Forever Amber" (Macmillan), long, bawdy, repetitious, a tale of the Restoration period, realistic in background and romantic in atmosphere, is meretricious romance and synthetic history, but its sales are already mounting to fantastic figures. How much of its wide circulation is due to advertising, how much to a desire to escape from the realities of the



present by immersion in the past, and how much to the lure of its preoccupation with sex is difficult to assess. Undoubtedly all three factors enter into its runaway popularity at a time when fiction is at a low ebb so far as distinction goes and when the general concern is with books of a different sort. For there is no doubt that during the past twelve months the war and the problems connected with it have preëminently engrossed the minds of American readers.

No war in history has been covered so completely as is the present struggle. Every sector of the battle arenas, every phase of action has had its reporter and commentator. The outstanding characteristic, perhaps, of this mass of literature is its sobriety. There is nothing of that romantic attitude toward combat which the First World War still elicited; war has been completely stripped of glamor and though the heroism and the devotion of the men who are carrying on the conflict are implicit in every page of the records of their activities there is no attempt at romanticizing or sentimentalizing their deeds. Such books as Ernie Pyle's "Brave Men" (Holt),

Jack Belden's "Still Time to Die" (Harpers), Robert Tregaskis's "Invasion Diary" (Random House), and Robert Sherrod's "Tarawa" (Duell, Sloan & Pearce), to single out a quartet of the most outstanding, convey the agony and tragic magnificence of battle through their factual accounts and not through any attempt to invest them with emotional content.

Mr. Pyle is unique in his preoccupation with the enlisted men whose reactions he observes with understanding and reflects with fidelity. Mr. Belden not only depicts the warfare in various sectors, China, North Africa, Italy, but, reflecting, if not in tranquillity, in the enforced quietude of a hospital bed, on the psychological aspects of combat, presents a brilliant essay on the rationale of men at war. Mr. Tregaskis, wounded like Mr. Belden in the course of his duties as correspondent, portrays not only the incidents of the action in which he participated but the incidence of injury on its victim. Mr. Sherrod writes with a complete objectiveness that is more effective than any rhetorical portrayal could be of one of the most harrowing episodes of the Pacific warfare. Differing in kind from the foregoing, but no less sincere, no less illuminating, and more artistic as literature than any of them is John Mason Brown's "Many a Watchful Night" (Whittlesey House) which distills through the alembic of its compassionate understanding the spirit of the fighting men in their days of waiting as well as in their hour of action.

To this group of battlefront records many more can be added. To choose almost at random among them, note should be made of Leland Stowe's "They Shall Not Sleep" (Knopf), with its pictures of Russia, China, and Burma at war; Quentin Reynolds's "The Curtain Rises" (Random House), containing in particular an account of American engineers at work in Iran; Margaret Bourke-White's "They Called It 'Purple Heart Valley'" (Simon & Schuster), in which magnificent photographs accompany a spirited account of the fighting in Italy; Hassoldt Davis's record of Free French activities in Africa, "Half Past When" (Lippincott); Griffith Bailey Coale's "Victory at Midway" (Farrar & Rinehart), an artist's portrayal of the war with accompanying narrative; A. J.

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