

Our Knight & Windmill

A Classic Re-evaluated

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article initiates a weekly series of literary re-evaluations that SRL is presenting in conjunction with the National Broadcasting Company and the University of Louisville. Eighteen authors, ranging from Cervantes to Stephen Crane, will be discussed. Concurrently with this series "NBC Theatre" will offer a dramatization of an important work by each author concerned. The broadcasts are presently heard Sunday afternoons (check local newspapers for time and station). This fall "NBC Theatre" forms part of a course in world fiction offered by the "University of the Air"—a project in education via radio begun by the University of Louisville and now sponsored by several other schools as well. SRL is associating itself with this significant project by publishing weekly critical essays designed to assess the contemporary meaning of the authors.

Readers who may wish to enroll in the "University of the Air"—either for college credit or just plain enjoyment—should write to SRL for the name of the nearest participating university. "Don Quixote" will be broadcast September 24.

THREE YEARS ago the literary world celebrated the four-hundredth birthday of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, though it is to be noted that Cervantes's countrymen treated Spain's greatest writer with the cold disdain that critics in totalitarian countries mete out to humanists and liberals of their own, or any other, century. Only a year ago the English-speaking world was favored with a superb translation of Cervantes's immortal classic, "Don Quixote," on which Samuel Putnam, an American, had been engaged for more than sixteen years. Like many another famous and classic writer, Cervantes's name and reputation had remained unblemished, but readers of the present generation were finding the translations of "Don Quixote" less and less to their liking. The clumsy attempts to lend an antique flavor to Cervantes's lucid Castilian prose and to turn his comedy into heavy-handed burlesque were described by an English critic and scholar, Aubrey F. G. Bell, whose biographical study of Cervantes happily coincided with the anniversary of Cervantes's birth. His work offered a modern and brilliant commentary as a text for writers whose task it was to restore for the moment an almost legendary name to its rightful place in the hierarchy of genius and to lend new life to a masterpiece which has been translated into more languages than any other work except the Bible.

Aubrey Bell asked a difficult question: whether as a universal classic "Don Quixote" had not joined Dante, Milton, Shakespeare, and the Bible in being universally praised but com-

paratively seldom read. Out of the twelve persons "of keen intelligence and wide reading" he had questioned half had not read "Don Quixote," and none of them spoke of it with unqualified admiration. As those who had read it depended on English-language translations "which did not do justice to the original," they wrote that they found it to be dull and almost unreadable. Mr. Bell's inclusion of the Bible and Shakespeare in this list increases rather than diminishes the stature of "Don Quixote" in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it is certain that a book of foreign authorship cannot appear to its readers to be any better than its translation, so that the devotees of Cervantes as one of the world's greatest writers can only hope that Mr. Putnam's lucid "Don Quixote" will be soon presented in popular editions for a host of new readers.

There is every reason why "Don

Quixote" should remain an immortal classic. It is one of the most human and humane books ever written; it is full of vigor and life and humor. Though it is a satire on chivalric romances of the Middle Ages it is not necessary for the reader ever to have troubled his head with Orlando Furioso, Amadis of Gaul, or Don Belianis of Greece, or the other fabulous knights-errant who rescued maidens and slew dragons during the years when chivalry was proclaiming its right to dominate ordinary human beings and to overwhelm the rules of logic and common sense. When Cervantes wrote in his old age "The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha" the age of chivalry was passing, for men were wearied of wandering heroes and the toll they exacted from poor and rich alike.

"Don Quixote" is essentially concerned with the birth of a new, democratic life for humanity. "The Knight of the Dolorous Countenance" and his comic, and yet intensely human, squire, Sancho Panza, became one as comrades in adversity. Throughout the entire book the innate wisdom and humanity of the poorest of the subjects of Spain are transparent to every reader. Shepherds, muleteers, hungry peasants, slatternly maids, and even criminals on their way to serve in the king's galleys are thus transformed by Cervantes's magic.

GR EAT literature not only mirrors life, it creates it, so that the human beings who play their parts in poetry, in novels, or on the stage have an immortality that history only grants to its greatest figures, the saints and devils, the rulers and conquerors who have appealed to the imagination of mankind over the centuries. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are living today, though one was an elderly poverty-stricken soldier and the other a peasant. Their absurd adventures led them into the heart of the peasantry whose vitality was once

"You are right, Sancho," said Don Quixote, "but you must remember that all times are not alike and do not always take the same course; and what the vulgar commonly call omens (for which there is no rational basis) are to be looked upon by the wise man as being no more than happy accidents. One of these believers in omens will rise in the morning, leave his house, and fall in with a friar of the order of the blessed St. Francis; whereupon, as though he had encountered a griffin, he will turn around and go home. If a Mendoza chances to spill salt on the table, he spills gloom over his heart at the same time, just as if nature were under any obligation to give notice of coming misfortunes through things of such little moment as those mentioned. The man who is at once wise and a Christian ought not to trifle with the will of Heaven. When Scipio came to Africa he stumbled as he leaped ashore, and his soldiers took it for an ill omen, but as he embraced the earth he cried out, 'You will not escape me, Africa, for I hold you tightly in my arms.' And similarly, Sancho, our meeting with these images has been for me simply a very happy occurrence."

—"DON QUIXOTE," PART II, CHAP. 58.

the strength of nations as well as of literature. The men and women of the hills and the plains, living in squalid villages and on remote farms, are the lifeblood of this long and vigorous narrative. The hard lot of the peasantry seemed changeless and eternal. In Spain, closed off from the rest of Europe by the rude wall of the Pyrenees, the pipes of pan and the clamorous revels of Bacchus were heard long after they had vanished from the rest of Western Europe. To other nations it was a romantic land where tragedy and comedy, wealth and poverty, lived side by side. It belonged to the past and it lay waiting for a writer who could present it to the future by giving life to the humblest of its people.

"DON QUIXOTE" is one of the most personal books ever written for, unlike Shakespeare, if there had remained only an unsubstantial and actual record of his history Cervantes's experiences in life could have been resurrected from the chapters of "Don Quixote." It is the book of a man who had suffered neglect and poverty nearly all his life, who was aware of "the growing hollowness of his age."

The first twenty years of Cervantes's life are almost blank, though he had obviously attended one or more of the flourishing universities that had become one of the glories of Spain's golden age. He became a playwright, novelist, and poet, who lived for years half-starved in garrets in Madrid; a soldier, a slave of the Moors in Oran until his ransom was paid, a man who saw with melancholy the decline of Spain's power and wealth, the slow surrender of its mastery of learn-

ing and the arts. He had served in the household of Cardinal Aqua-viva in Italy; he had fought in the naval battles of Lepanto and Navarino, had helped to provision the "Invincible Armada" for its attack on England; and when his country could offer him no advantageous post he tried again to make a living with plays and poetry. Cervantes was thirty-eight, and a poet recognized by others, when he wrote his pastoral novel, "La Galatea;" he was fifty-eight when the first edition of "Don Quixote" was published in Madrid. Ten years later the members of a French embassy in the capital "heard with amazement that the author of 'Galatea,' the 'Novelas exemplares,' and 'Don Quixote' was old, a soldier, a gentleman, and poor." His European fame had not brought him prosperity or a great name among his countrymen.

As a writer Cervantes might have revealed his bitterness by excoriating satire; on the contrary, he avoided it as unworthy. Essentially a realist, he reveled in the contrasts between men and women as they were and as they were presented by romantists or their own imaginings. It is impossible not to see the image of Cervantes in Don Quixote, whom he describes on the first page as "this gentleman of ours was close on to fifty, of a robust countenance but with little flesh on his bones and a face that was lean and gaunt." He never laughs, but he is always the occasion for it in others; and yet it is laughter tinged with kindness and understanding, with a kind of human sympathy for the poor, mad gentleman who appeared on his sorry nag, in an ancient helmet and a battered breastplate with an absurdly fat and bewildered servant following him on a bedraggled ass. Cervantes's powers of invention were as prodigious as was his gift for comedy and fantasy. "The laughter of Cervantes," writes Aubrey Bell, "like that in Shakespeare and in Rabelais, is the



—New York Public Library Picture Collection.

"Don Quixote and Sancho Panza."

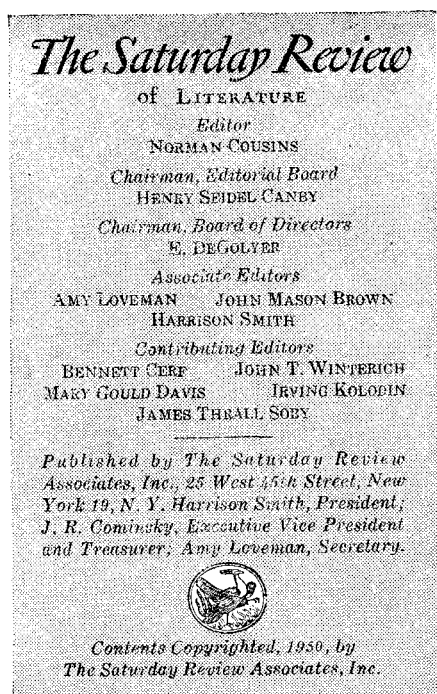
last echo of medieval laughter before the world settled down into the seventeenth-century age of wit and the eighteenth-century age of reason."

There has been too little of this commodity in the world, and today we have almost lost sight of it. Since we can no longer find it amongst our own writers, or sense the deep humanity from which it originated, we should turn back to "Don Quixote" again or discover its magic for the first time. It will give the reader a glimpse of a Spain at one of the great moments of history, when the full tide of the Renaissance was ebbing but when the people, poor and rich alike, were bathed in the light of its glorious sunset. No other book like this foremost of all novels has ever been written, for it looks backward into medievalism and forward into years which gave birth to the modern world. We who are now enmeshed in mechanical progress and gigantic wars have lost sight of a world and a generation which could produce a Cervantes; but if we take the pains to do so, we can at least broaden our horizon by becoming acquainted with the ageless figures, the human passions and follies, the vast landscapes which have given a kind of immortality to his work, as they have to the poetry and plays of his equally great contemporary, Shakespeare.

In Print

FOR the full flavor of Cervantes's masterpiece readers are referred to the two-volume translation by the late Samuel Putnam (Viking Press, \$10). This labor of love has been widely commended as the most literate and faithful key to "Don Quixote" in the English language.

The translation supervised by Pierre Antoine Motteux (1701) dominated all others before the publication of Putnam's. Its reliance on broad burlesque consorts ill with the original, but it has served enthusiasts for two and a half centuries. The complete Motteux translation can be found in a Modern Library Giant with illustrations by Doré (\$2.45) and in two Everyman's volumes (Dutton, 95¢ each).



Woodrow Wilson and His Clients

MONDAY, September 25, is the thirty-first anniversary of one of the saddest and most costly days in American history. It was on that day that Woodrow Wilson made his last public speech. He was fighting to win over the American people to the cause of the League of Nations, for he was convinced that the war just ended would become merely the opening episode of a continuing tragedy if the nations failed to establish world law. And the biggest test was right here in America. Public opinion was slow in seeing the connection between world peace and world law. Traditionally, too, the American people had been accustomed to waiting for a problem to come to a boil before doing anything about it. Wilson's case rested on the need to anticipate crisis as the best means of crushing it.

Imagine the unutterable anguish of the man who had managed to convince millions of people all over the world of this, only to return home to find that leaders of the opposing political party had been capitalizing on the desire of Americans to forget about the war, forget about Europe, forget about involvements. And the campaign against the League was succeeding. Hence Wilson's decision to carry the fight for peace to the people. It was to be a tour that would attempt to crack open the isolationist heartland. The compressed schedule called for about one hundred speeches before audiences in almost every state stretching from Ohio to the West

Coast—all in a few short weeks.

The best account of that trip—Wilson's last public trip—is to be found in a compelling and evocative book, "Woodrow Wilson as I Know Him," by Joseph P. Tumulty, his confidant and friend who served as private secretary for eleven years. The book appeared in 1921 and is now out of print, but it is hoped that the publishers can be persuaded to bring out a new edition, for what it has to say is even more timely today than it was a generation ago.

Tumulty wrote that the small group around Wilson resisted the idea of the trip as soon as it became known. The President had returned from Europe showing the effects of his exertions. He was suffering from violent headaches and was easily fatigued. When an attempt was made to postpone the trip Wilson would have none of it. He told Tumulty that he knew he was "at the end of my tether," but insisted that a desperate effort had to be made to win over the American people in time.

"If the Treaty should be defeated," he said, "God only knows what would happen to the world as a result of it. In the presence of the great tragedy which now faces people everywhere, no decent man can count his own personal fortunes in the reckoning."

Tumulty suggested a compromise. Set aside one week in the tour for a rest at a quiet place in the Grand Canyon. Even this the President rejected. "This is a business trip, pure and simple," he insisted, "and the itinerary must not include a vacation of any kind."

The trip got under way. As it progressed, Wilson seemed somehow to find a magical second wind that enabled him to speak three, four, or even five times a day, seven days a week. Tumulty and the President's staff marveled at his ability to mask his fatigue while talking. Never had they heard him more eloquent or more convincing. Many of the talks were extemporaneous but they all reflected Wilson's great talent for clarity and precision of thought and expression.

And Wilson's message was getting across. It was hard work, but you could see the people responding to the call for sanity and the need to put decency to work in dealings among nations. There were hopes in the President's party that the encouraging early reactions would reach a crescendo by the time the tour ended. When the President spoke at Pueblo on September 25 he was more impassioned and effective than ever. It was a longer talk than usual, and it almost seemed that Wilson realized it might be his last. As he spoke the audience

was deeply moved by what he said but they were also moved by his frail appearance. It was easy to see that something was wrong; his face clearly showed the effects of the constant strain not only of the trip but of his labors overseas for the League.

He began his Pueblo talk by saying that he had come to speak in behalf of his clients. Those clients, he said, were the next generation. He wanted to be sure that the measures would be taken here and now that would make it unnecessary for that next generation to be sent on another war errand. He spoke of the hundreds of American mothers who came up to grasp his hand during his trip—mothers whose sons had been killed in France. They had said, many of them, "God bless you, Mr. President."

"Why, my fellow citizens," he asked, "should they pray God to bless me? I advised the Congress of the United States to create the situation that led to the death of their sons. I ordered their sons overseas. I consented to their sons being put in the most difficult parts of the battle line, where death was certain, as in the impenetrable difficulties of the Argonne forest. Why should they weep upon my hand and call down the blessings of God upon me? They do so because they believe that their boys died for something that vastly transcends any of the immediate and palpable objects of the war. They believe that wrapped up with the liberty of the world is the continuous protection of that liberty by the concerted powers of all the civilized world."

"These men were crusaders. They were going forth to prove the might of justice and right, and all the world accepted them as crusaders. Their achievement has made all the world believe in America as it believes in no other nation in the modern world."

THE PRESIDENT spoke of his visit to a hillside near Paris, at the cemetery of Suresnes, where American soldiers were buried. He then referred to the many men in Congress and public life who were now opposing the creation of a world society which, if all nations joined in giving it real authority, might be able to crush the causes of war, and he said he hoped these men might have been with him to see those graves.

"I wish," he said, "that they could feel the moral obligation that rests upon us not to go back on those boys, but to see the thing through, to see it through to the end and make good the redemption of the world. For nothing less depends upon this decision, nothing less than the liberation and salvation of the world."

"Now that the mists of this great