

Critic from Academe

"Contexts of Criticism," by **Harry Levin** (Harvard University Press. 294 pp. \$5), is a collection of essays on literature and the literary situation, most of them dealing with the present century. Professor William Van O'Connor of the University of Minnesota, our reviewer, is the author of *"The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner."*

By William Van O'Connor

HARRY LEVIN writes like a very good English don. I say this not to belittle but rather to characterize his new book *"Contexts of Criticism,"* which is witty, intelligent, and learned. Each of the essays, which cover a wide range of subjects, was originally given as a lecture. The first section is entitled "Working Definitions" and includes "New Frontiers in the Humanities," "Art as Knowledge," "Contexts of the Classical," "The Tradition of Tradition," and "What Is 'Realism?'" The other two sections are entitled "Notations on Novelists" and "Long Views," each of which includes five essays.

"Criticism in Crisis," from "Long Views," is a fine description of our literary situation as Alexandrian and it shows how at home Mr. Levin is in academic life. He sees as a good and necessary thing the return of critics to the university ("The emergence of the critic as a reviewer, commenting on books as they came along rather than lecturing on them afterwards, coincided with the rise of periodicals in the eighteenth century") and their being joined there by "many creative writers." He sees no great conflict between the critical and the creative. The two gifts frequently coexist. Where there is a conflict, he says, it is necessary for the two types to join forces: "Among all those who live by the printed word, such differences are far less strategic than their shared and jeopardized commitment: which is no, or never, the critique of forces encroaching not only upon the creation of literature but upon the preservation of culture itself."

In "Observations on Hemingway" he partially defends the academy against Hemingway's accusations that Academic America raises dust storms that are dispersed by "the rain" of honest writing. "Those of us who live

in the shelter of the academy will not be put off by this disregard; for most of us have more occasion than he to be repelled by the encrustations of pedantry. . . ." The essay itself is an excellent account of Hemingway's style, being especially good in showing the relationship therein of motion to emotion. Levin also gives Hemingway a couple of "lessons," telling him that his *and* method of linking sentences is called *polysyndeton* and that his method of argumentation is sometimes sly: "In the course of a single sentence, utilizing a digressive Ciceronian device, *paralipsis*, he has not only rounded up such writers as he considers academic; he has not only accused them of sterility, by means of that slippery shortcut which we professors term an enthymeme . . ." Levin meets Hemingway on his own ground and comes off pretty well.

There is further evidence of Levin's love of erudition in his sympathetic account of "Joyce's Sentimental Journey." He enjoys recalling that Joyce had contemplated a career as a professor of Romance languages at his college in Dublin. He sees Joyce's career as an Irish contribution to European culture: "Joyce's sentimental journey was neither a pilgrimage nor a crusade; it was his realization of Irish nationality within the widening perspective of European culture. In short, it was a tale of two cities, Paris and Trieste; of French poetry and erudition, of Italian music and philosophy; of two older writers rediscovered by a younger disciple, Edouard Diyardin and Italo Svevo; of two timeless masters, Flaubert, invisible and omnipresent, and Dante, first and last."

There may be two or three essays that are "academic" in the pejorative sense. One of these is "What Is Realism?" As a critical term, realism long ago lost any usefulness. Undoubtedly it belongs in the literary histories—but Mr. Levin should have left it there. He does a good deal better with "tradition" in "The Tradition of Tradition," for the term is one that still figures in literary arguments.

In reading some of Levin's essays one might be a little depressed by the learned allusions and the facts out of unexpected contexts, and not merely out of envy. But to quarrel too much about this would be to quarrel with his very real virtue as a critic.



Herbert J. Muller—"civilized over-view."

A Western Glory

"The Spirit of Tragedy," by **Herbert J. Muller** (Knopf. 335 pp. \$5), is a survey of tragic drama since the Greeks, with observations on the nature of tragedy. Professor Howard Mumford Jones of Harvard is our reviewer.

By Howard Mumford Jones

HERBERT J. MULLER'S "The Spirit of Tragedy" is described on the dust jacket as a "searching inquiry into the uses of tragedy." This is precisely what it is not. It is, rather, a pleasant, civilized over-view of a good deal of tragic drama since the Greeks, coupled with evidences of wide and intelligent reading in tragic theory, commonly introduced by the phrase, "As So-and-so remarks." "I speak mournfully as a teacher," he remarks in a footnote, "who has tried to do his best for Corneille," and Mr. Muller does his conscientious best, not only for Corneille, but for persons as various as Sophocles, Wagner, O'Neill, and Sartre. His book, he tells us in his preface, grew out of a question that takes us to the heart of tragedy; and the question is: why the periods of tragic glory have been confined to the Western world. This, he says, "involves the distinctive values of Western civilization," but with every sympathy for Mr. Muller's good intentions I cannot see that he has quite answered his own question, largely because, by confining himself to the Atlantic community, he denies himself any comparable examination of other cultures.

One of Mr. Muller's difficulties is uncertainty as to where to look for
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The True End of Knowledge

LAST year you and I, progressive Americans all, consumed 45 million aspirin tablets daily. Each night we swallowed 20 million sleeping pills, the next morning chasing them with as many million "wake-up" pills. American doctors will this year write nearly 40 million prescriptions for the new anti-worry pills, called "tranquilizers," hoping to stave off the anxiety, depression, and fear that hamstring our modern living. Juvenile delinquency is a common topic over our teacups. Seventy-five million Americans are chronic drinkers and 5 million of these are confirmed alcoholics.

Such is the price of our sagacity: one out of every two hospital beds in America is occupied by a mental patient; one out of every ten children born suffers a mental illness. Today the hallmarks of our civilization are stomach ulcers and heart attacks. Slowly but surely in our land of bounty we are driving ourselves to a sort of prosperous desperation. Like modern Franksteins we are being devoured by our own alchemies, and many of us find ourselves American aliens, mentally and spiritually displaced in our own native land.

However did we come to believe that we could manufacture happiness out of steel and synthetics and bring peace and good will to earth by splitting an atom?

It is trite but true that our generation has made greater technological advances than all our ancestors combined since time began. We have indeed turned natural resources into heretofore undreamt-of power, power to send planes around the world without refueling, power to place perpetual-motion machines in outer

space, power to blast mankind from the face of the earth forevermore. Yet, withal, we know we have failed to tap the greatest resource of all, the power of the human being for mutual understanding and respect, one for another, his benign ability to settle his difficulties and differences in peace. And until we do learn in lowliness of mind to esteem another as equal or better than ourselves, violence shall not cease to be heard in the world, nor wasting, nor destruction.

Perhaps our fault lies in our trusting nothing we cannot see or hear or feel—for we are opportunists, most of us. But the problem goes deeper. We have somehow taught ourselves that might makes right, that superiority is virtuous, that wisdom is found in gold and onyx and sapphires and topaz.

I am a librarian. There is prevalent opinion which holds that librarianship is a sort of Casper Milquetoast profession, and that our stock-in-trade—namely, the book—is an ineffectual artifact which serves primarily to collect dust on musty, dim-lit shelves. Therefore, the book is of no practical importance, we hear, for the busy, hard-driving man of the world.

But let me state that throughout all history man's recorded word has been more powerful than his most diabolical machines. And books—instead of being lifeless, static things—have been man's most dynamic, most explosive force in the world. No other has had so powerful an impact upon humanity, anywhere, anytime. If you doubt this, remember "The Prince," remember "Das Kapital," remember "Mein Kampf" and "Uncle Tom's Cabin,"

and remember the New Testament.

While I can do no more in this space than express a solitary opinion, I am convinced that the world we have made for ourselves is scheduled for sadder days unless we learn to capitalize on man's innate goodness and somehow to sponsor his eternal yearning for peace and lovingkindness, one for another. The deep, deep reservoir of the human spirit, powerful and everlasting, yet remains to be utilized for the preservation of all that mankind—in his sanest moments—really believes in and cherishes. I would address one general admonition to us all: consider the true end of knowledge—seek it not for pleasure or profit, not for prowess or power, but only for the benefit and betterment of mankind.

Librarians, teachers, preachers, statesmen, writers, and others have the vast advantage of communication. And we have easy access to the materials which man most needs to direct or re-direct his destiny and to strengthen his armor, intellectual, cultural, and spiritual. However, man and the materials so necessary to his beneficence do not just happily fall together, by chance. They must be brought together—and in my humble opinion this very act of bringing them together is the principal role of the librarian of the future. If our era is one of tragedy, terror, and maddening tension, it is also one of tremendous opportunity and unbounded challenge. The future promises even greater opportunity, even vaster challenge.

UP TO now the library profession has put great stress upon acquiring materials and upon organizing them for their smooth flow into the hands of our patrons. But the time has come, or so it seems to me, for us to realize that these practices, however important, are but means to an end. The end itself, we must know, is wisely interpreting these materials for the hosts of men, women, and children of all walks of life, who now more than ever come within our care, providing them proper guidance to the vast store of recorded knowledge which is our rightful province. Surely, our success in helping them survive their many ordeals, in making them better citizens of a world we must all inhabit—whether we like it or not—may be measured in terms of our ability to translate into dynamic force the best that has been thought and said in the past and found only in our workshops. Therein lies the real, the only solid foundation for "The Library and Its Future."

—W. STANLEY HOOLE.

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