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Louis Untermeyer Speaks of Verse

Author of "New Era in American Poetry" Declares Poetry Our Beginning in Art

By Rebecca Drucker

The acoustics of the ivory tower of criticism have always been notoriously bad. To apprehend the undertones and overtones of modern poetry, literary critics have had to move down a few stories. Louis Untermeyer, who has caught the cadences of modern verse more clearly than any one else, has been spared that trouble, however. He is not in good standing as a member of the ivory tower fraternity; he has always stood outside it and joyously hurled bricks at it.

One of the inhibitions he has broken through with his brilliant book, "The New Era in American Poetry," is the fiction that the work of the critic is impartial judgment. Impartial judgment in art, as in human relationships, is a hypocritical assumption. By what is involuntary and therefore most valuable in him the critic ranges himself on one side or another. His resources of art may be great enough to mask his prejudices, but, Untermeyer affirms, the test of his greatness is the power with which he urges his belief. What is most illuminating in his own book comes out of his passionate partisanship with the free verse movement.

Into the criticism of free verse, as into free verse itself, have been thrown all the rich, racy elements of common life, the judgments and perceptions salvaged out of the swift rush of daily living. The modern unacademic criticism subjects poetry to the acid test of reality. A basic requirement, says Untermeyer, is that poetry should be at least as intelligible as good prose and that it should say a thing a degree better. For the rest modern criticism holds the balance between expression and life, with as keen and skeptical eye on one as on the other.

Untermeyer has an irresistible inclination to parody. Perhaps nowhere is the critical gift more shrewdly displayed than in parody. An irreverence of approach and sensitiveness to form and content are as essential qualities of parody as of serious criticism. He has recently completed a series of parodies on the "Integer Vitae" ode of Horace—in the manner of Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, Amy Lowell, Robert Frost and Irving Berlin. He finds it hard, too, to let the classics rest in the petrified attitudes into which they have fallen. Better take liberties with them than take them for granted, he says. His translations of Heine and Horace are highly revivifying affairs. After all, the ancients did not know they were ancient. "Every high school boy studies Horace," said Untermeyer, "and what does he know of Ode 23 except that it is an example of the dative case used as the ablative? Ode 23 might stay a little longer with him if he knew that in it Horace was making love to a married woman who would have none of him. Horace wasn't a thinker and he wasn't an Olympian. He was an extremely accomplished poet and a man wise in the ways of the world."

In his own person Untermeyer is extraordinarily expressive of that realism which free verse tries to capture. He is delighted to violate the moonstruck fashion of poetic personality. He is clear-cut and energetic—a dark, eager, inquisitive young man who watches the social phenomena quizzically through his pince-nez. And he is a literary man only in the intervals of a very regular and mundane jewelry business. He spends his days directing men in a factory and he is a little disposed to boast how well he has done at the job. When his unfortunate attachment for poetry was discovered by the senior members of the firm eight years ago they met in a panic and discussed dropping him. They regarded him with cold suspicion until his sales records thawed them out. Later they turned the factory over to him and their misgivings returned when they saw the plan by which he proposed to manage it.

These incongruities, this combination of the visionary and the practical, this eternal relation of the hard outward fact with the inward adventure is extraordinarily and oddly typical of America, and it is shaping itself into our verse. In all his criticism the dominant note is the discovery of something typically and pungently American.

"What we are only beginning to realize," said Untermeyer, "is that not only in our poetry is our equivalent of the English novel, as Gilbert Cannan says, but that it is our American discovery of art. We have had no native art until this. In painting we have turned out perhaps three artists of approximately first rank; and they have, like Whistler, all been shaped by foreign influences. In music we have only MacDowell, and he wrote with a Scottish idiom. Our prose literature is derived from the English or from the French. But in our free verse we have reached an indigenous expression. Whitman reached down and tapped something absolutely native and unique. The French were quick to see his greatness, and they embodied him in their forms before we did. But even when in the modern insurgent movement we copied the French free verse forms, we were only getting back our own; we were returning the Whitmanic stream to its course.

"We are expressing in our modern American poetry more things than poetry has been made to say before, and saying them in more varied ways. The English have blazed no new trails in verse. In De La Mare and Hodgson and Bridges, in spite of their forms, the Wordsworthian strain is continued. Theirs are lyrical expressions which still come out of the pastoral and lovely English countryside.

"Does all this rush of expression have a coherence—does it seem to you to form a pattern?" I asked.

"It does just that. We are compounded of richer and more varied strains than any other nation, each asserting its own aspirations in its own idiom, but joining to form something uniquely and powerfully American.

"There is James Oppenheim, for instance. Consciously or not, he brings to modern verse something Eastern, something of his rhapsodic Hebraic strain, the Messianic hope that a redeemer will still be found for the world. From Robert Frost there gushes a vein of poetry, slowly like an icy stream that trickles from a rocky hillside, but it is flavored and nutty and sweet with something of the tang of maple in it. It is austere and a little thin, but all the fine flavor of New England is in it. And there is Vachel Lindsay, who shouts with the raucous voice of the Middle West in self-conscious discovery of itself. He is perhaps closest to the Whitmanic tradition and its ecstatic discovery of the common man. Rhymes, ragtime and religion are his three R's. And Edgar Lee Masters, who has lifted the gossip of small and mean towns into the great and universal stuff of poetry. And Carl Sandburg, who has lifted so curiously the common speech of America into poetry, making the words of the ledger, the street, the factory into something eloquent and revealing. These are only a few of the dozens who are weaving the varied threads of American life into an intelligible pattern.

"All this experimentation is proof of our vitality. We are groping our way toward things that have not been articulated before in poetry and neither the old form nor the old code of literary morals is of any use to us. The old rules do not fit the game at any point, but in groping for a new set of values much that is odd and excessive and even worthless is mixed up with what is really original and fine.

"It is doubtful whether this defense of modern literary morals will carry weight with the academicians. For generations they have sat in at poetry as at a gentleman's game, serene in the dignified assurance that no one present had a card up his sleeve. The outsiders who are suddenly confronted by the company of players who are nonplussed at being caught with a whole deck in reserve, who humorously pay tribute, who cheerfully outrage form and who vulgarly argle points, is obvious. After all, whatever defeat the academicians suffer at the hands of the free versifiers, there will always be the moral victory. Only the rate of exchange on moral victories has always been low.

John Masefield, author of "Reynard the Fox." (Published by the Macmillan Company).

A Soldier's War Drawings

C. Leroy Baldridge Catches Spirit of A. E. F. In Spirited Sketches of Life at the Front

"I WAS THERE WITH THE YANKS IN FRANCE." Sketches by LeRoy Baldridge. A. L. Burt Company, publishers. By Edgar A. Bauhage, Pvt. A. E. F. 6 P. Pathas's Sons, New York.

The returned soldier, complain the folks who stayed at home, does not like to talk about the war. They are right. The returned soldier does not like to talk about the war for the same reason that a stationary fireman would not ordinarily choose to talk about tallow dips and boiler castings with a professor of Sanskrit.

When the overseas man is asked (as he has been asked some millions of times in the bitter first year of peace) what it felt like in the trenches, his sentiments are much like those of a bricklayer toward a casual passerby seeking first-hand knowledge of the sensations of slathering a trowelload of mortar on the next layer. The soldier feels tremendously self-conscious, and his outspoken answer, if a false sense of politeness does not restrain it, must be, "Damn it, how can I tell you? You weren't there!"

Mr. Baldridge's advantage (outside of such minor essentials as the ability to delineate what he sees without wasting a line doing it, or caring if the pencil stroke does not terminate precisely at the edge of the external outlook, or minding if a splotch of water trickles down across a background) is that he was there. His audience was a soldier audience, and he was one of them. They knew, as so many otherwise faultless illustrators fail to know, that a gas mask when worn at the alert position always has the flap on your left chest, that canvas leggings might have been all right in the early period of Camp Upton, but were not being worn northwest of Toul, that the transportation portion of the Sam Browne belt did not loop through the left shoulder strap. A querulous critic might charge that even Mr. Baldridge may not have known that last fact. For there is not a single Sam Browne belt left in "I Was There."

These, of course, are mere details of equipment. Even if two artists who never got overseas studied the uniform painstakingly enough to depict soldiers who would have satisfied the most captious of doughboy critics—and captious is the word. But more than that was essential. It was needful to live the life, to sleep in dugouts whose extremes of humidity varied from robust freshets down to mere seepy dampness, to be hailed as a buddy by other buddies, to be halted by M. P.'s as two million other men were halted more than that many times each, as they can tell the world. Any fair draftsman can paint the thing as he sees it. But to do that and paint the thing as it is—that is a coincidence which Mr. Kipling did not even dare promise his celestial splashers as ten-league canvases. Mr. Baldridge has achieved that coincidence. That is why his pictures are the finest instantaneous answer yet given to the question, "What was it like?"

One tremendous artificial advantage Mr. Baldridge had. The American face—one soon discovered in France that there was an American face—became, under the American helmet, one of the most spiritual models that ever lent themselves to portrayal. The face alone was not so much, the helmet alone was not so much, the helmet plus the face was superb.

The spirituality itself came from within. The melding of helmet and face served only to bring it out. It is the quality that Mr. Baldridge caught. It is the interpretation of it that is enough to make him a great artist, the being of which, after all, is something more than being a good craftsman.

Mr. Baldridge's own overseas career is perhaps too well known to require extended treatment in a place where there is no special reason for the inclusion of any biographical data at all. After his first service as a caisson driver, with the French army, he was transferred to the United States army with no reduction in rank. In fact, he would have ended his military career at the station where he began it, a buck private, save for an unfortunate clerical error almost on the day he was discharged by which he was inconsiderately promoted to the grade of private first class. With his transfer to the A. E. F. began the series of cartoons and sketches for "The Stars and Stripes" which were not the least of that newspaper's claims to being the voice of embattled and uniformed America.

Mr. Baukhage's verse hits a note of sincerity that is in keeping with the pictures. But the pictures, as Mr. Baukhage would be the first to admit, are the main show.

Hawaiian Stories

ON THE MAKAANA MAT. By Jack London. The MacMillan Company, New York.

To the late Jack London belongs the credit of having introduced the Hawaiian people to the world, and in these seven hitherto unpublished tales of latter-day Hawaiian life he leaves us further indebted to him for a number of odd and fascinating characters—native and white—drawn with sympathy and great skill.

One or two of the stories are exceptionally fascinating to wit: When Alice Told Her Soul and the Bones of Kaneaki, and the remainder are very readable, especially Shin Bones and the Kanaka Surf, a "superman" tale. In fact, the publisher's blurb is unusually justified in saying that in this book are to be found "wonderful tales of adventure, dramatic and revealing."

L. K.

Ibsen in England

IBSEN IN ENGLAND. By Miriam Franc. The Plain Publishing Company, Boston. $2 net.

Miss Franc has made a thorough study of the career of Ibsen's plays in England, and she has presented her findings in a chatty style which should serve as a model for the average researcher. The appendices, which include the casts of all English productions of Ibsen, are valuable, and the book as a whole should appeal to all who believe that Ibsen makes the heart grow fonder.

A Youthful Hero

MARTY LENDS A HAND. By H. S. Latham. The MacMillan Company, New York.

Mr. Latham has already shown his ability to write a rattling good boys' story in his previous book, "Under Orders." Marty, the hero of the present story, is a poor boy forced to leave school on account of an accident to his father. Buckling manfully down to work, he starts to cultivate mushrooms in an old and supposedly abandoned mine. He soon discovers that the mine is a hiding place for German agents, and renders valuable assistance in bringing the miscreants to justice. Later he rescues his small sister from an uncle who has been robbing the postoffice; his mushroom crop turns out splendidly, and the story comes to a happy end.

Mr. Latham understands boys and boy psychology to perfection. His story has just the right mixture of action and excitement, humor and sentiment to appeal to its youthful audience. Marty, the poor boy who wins his way to success through hard work, is a type that is always popular in American fiction. Mr. Latham sets forth the wholesome ideals of kindness, manliness and patriotism that parents like to have their children learn through the medium of a good, exciting story. It may safely be predicted that "Marty Lends A Hand" will become one of the most successful books of its kind published during the year.

A Bibliography

THE PLAYS AND BOOKS OF THE LITTLE THEATER. By Frank Shay. The Taper Crafts Exchange, New York. $1 net.

DAILY BREAD. A WINDOW TO THE SOUTH AND THE LEAN YEARS. Quotations by Mary Katharine Reely. The H. W. Wilson Company, New York. 25 cents net.

Mr. Shay has performed a real service in his little bibliography of "little theater" playlets and literature. Amateur and semi-professional dramatic societies always are on the trail of one-act plays, and Mr. Shay's descriptive list will go far to solve the problems of gymnasium and ballroom producers. We suggest to the directors of miniature playhouses that they do not take too ponderously Pierre Loving's pompous preface and the editor's Baedeker asterisks to the most notable pieces. But the booklet belongs in the hip pocket of every embryo Gordon Craig.

We fear that there will be little joy in the dramatic Mudville over Miss Reely's three strikes. The plays are talky and undramatic, and there is deal of sentimentality in them. We favor sugar control for the drama, and Miss Reely has taken more than her share.

A Victorian Critic

TRADITION AND CHANGE. By Arthur Waugh. E. P. Dutton & Co., New York.

With disarming ingenuousness Mr. Waugh in his introduction admits that he is applying the standards of the past to the products of the present literary generation. He is, indeed, typically Victorian in his style and outlook; always sound and constructive, never dighty, seldom brilliant. Yet his interpretations are not hidebound or pedantic; he always preserves the critic's most precious gift, an open mind.

Some of the longest essays contained in the book are devoted to the subject of English war poetry. The author is convinced that the tendency toward realism among the younger poets has been strengthened by the grim horrors of the conflict. He feels that the old artistic conception of war as a thing of splendor and beauty has now been shattered forever.

One of Mr. Waugh's best essays discusses the subject of "Dickens's Lovers." In fact, throughout the book, despite his candor and fairmindedness, the author shows himself more at home in the England of Arnold and Pater than in the England of Shaw and Wells.

by Kathleen Norris

SISTERS

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About a Column

Immoral Books: Pro and Anti

To the Book Editor, New York Tribune.

Dear, proper Miss Lewis's letter suggesting the censoring of books was thoroughly delightful and quite in the spirit of the times. Surely here is the nucleus of a new movement. The pure, who have so staunchly fought for our morals in the past, should again lift on high their glorious standard in behalf of humanity.

In quite a friendly spirit, for, needless to say, I enjoy your columns immensely, why not proscribe the complete works of William Shakespeare? Really, old man, he was terribly immoral. Why just look at those perfectly obscene songs that Ophelia used to sing. They would never do as a diet for the young. While we are at it, cleaning house, why not suppress all unexpurged editions of Chaucer and most of his vile contemporaries? Then, too, there are the Arabian Nights and the Decameron. I blush, old dear, I blush, when I think of that perfectly horrid Decameron. In approaching the French authors, I am still blushing, old man—why not wipe out their products altogether? Of course, some are passably moral, but after all you never can tell.

And as a last fell swoop, brother, why, I ask you in the friendliest spirit imaginable, not organize a movement to suppress the Bible? Surely there is no doubt in our ranks as to the immorality of many parts of that Book. For the good of the human race, which is really rather lacking in intellect and moral fiber, and for the benefit of the "poor, defenseless little children toddling to Sunday school" we should suppress this terrible document.

By the time we have accomplished these reforms the [illegible] throng of modern destroyers [illegible] due, including Elinor Glyn, "Bob" Chambers and that unspeakable [illegible] song that uses up white paper in "[illegible]" magazines of current fiction, will have added a long list for us to taboo. Anyhow, by that time the pastime of reading will have fallen into disuse and an amendment or so will finish it entirely, except for "The Christian Herald" and the reports of the Anti-Saloon League.

Hail, Miss Lewis! Your name shall go down in history with Anderson and Doc Pease. We greet you as one of us.

G. S. H.

Mr. Heywood Broun, New York Tribune, New York City:

"This is a book which you mute not read." About A Column, November 1.

That's right! Get us on moral grounds, then call us names. P. F. P.

Dear Heywood Broun:

I have just finished reading your "Defense of Immoral Books" and wonder if they need any, since most people read them, if for no other reason than to see just how wicked the world is growing. But, Dear Defender, won't you answer a question that has puzzled me all my life? Why do all the artists in the world agree that Purity and Beauty can rarely go together? Why did you read all of De Maupassant and only one volume of Emerson? Why do I like Verlaine and his "Chair Extasée angoureuse, C'est fatigue amoureuse" in preference to "The Village Blacksmith"? I cannot quote Verlaine. I dislike to think that I find intense joy in the sensuous music of "Cing-Mars" and very little in the "Stabat Mater," although I can still register genuine disgust at a nude representing either past or future art.

When I read the two letters sent you regarding "The Moon and Sixpence" my impulse was to agree with their writers and to question your statement as to "he who restricts his reading to moral books will miss much delightful literature." Do you mean, I wonder, that to be a good writer one must be a bad one, or that to love beauty means to love the foul, and consequently the ugly of life? Or does it all hinge on our own little definitions of good and bad? From your remarks about "The Moon and Sixpence" I know that it must contain many things, and yet when I shall eventually read it (despite my elders) I know I shall find myself liking it while wishing that I didn't. Why?

A. C. P. C.

Dear H. B.:

Here are some adventures in censorship.

I lived for several years in Brooklyn and made use of a circulating branch of the Brooklyn Public Library from which I took an English translation of Flaubert's "Salammbo." In attempting to read it I discovered that several pages were missing, and reported that fact at the desk. Of course, you can guess the answer—those portions were removed to protect the readers' morals. Overcome with curiosity, I went to the central library and was supplied without question with "Salammbo" in the original, which I read through to find out what they were protecting me from. I should never have done so otherwise, as I found it dull reading.

Again I browsed among the shelves and found many copies in English of "The Vicomte de Bragelonne" each with a chapter missing. I have forgotten now which one it was. Can you imagine anything more irritating than reading one of Dumas's "thrillers" with a large gap in the middle? I went to the French alcove in the same branch and found the "Vicomte" complete, took it out and read it with much satisfaction and no ascertainable moral damage.

Brooklynites apparently will go the limit to protect the morals of those patrons of the library who read English, but if they can read French well, it's curious, isn't it?

A. R. P.

To the Literary Editor of The Tribune:

Sir: I have been attracted by the question raised by one of your readers whether an "old woman" acting in the capacity of librarian should be allowed to withhold from the library shelves books she considers not up to a high moral standard. We are living in a strenuous age when an influence for mental and moral health must be exerted by each person in order to keep "safe and sane." We are told, and know it to be a fact, that, in order to keep our bodies in good condition, we must put in our stomachs good and wholesome food. Does not the same law hold good with the mind? Do not impure ideas, worse if seasoned by condiments of intellectual and literary merit, give mental dyspepsia in the same way that vitiated food would injure the body physically? Is the excuse, "it is true to life," sufficient to exonerate the author?

Any one knows a gnarled tree is not the only one of nature's beautiful forest efforts. Is the sordid in human nature the only natural quality? Again, are not great gifts given to man in order to help those who are their inferiors to rise higher? After reading "The Pretty Lady" by the gifted Arnold Bennett, I felt unseated and unfit to meet the emergencies of my daily tasks. Alas, that so many authors should feel that evil is predominant and that they who contend that "good even more abounds" are ignorant of the world. Why must we wallow in slime when there are clear places to tread upon? In regard to the "old woman"—age should bring a clearer vision than youth.

M. V. H.

Boy Scouts Year Book

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THE SON OF PIO By C. L. Carlsen
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But greater still is the mercilessly truthful portrait of the woman, his wife, who, clothing her little spirit in the appearances of virtue, deceives the coarse vision of the world.

THE BUILDERS
by Ellen Glasgow
Author of "Virginia" and "Life and Gabriella"

DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & CO., Garden City, New York

Industrial Books

The almost universal prevalence of strikes has very naturally called forth an extraordinary interest in all the newer books which have any bearing upon the labor situation. It is therefore no surprise to learn from D. Appleton & Co. that their industrial books are enjoying an unprecedented sale. Among those which they name as the most popular are Sudekum's "The Turmoil over of Factory Labor," Hoxie's "Trade Unionism" and "Scientific Management and Labor," Barnett and Straubel's "Mediation, Investigation and Arbitration in Industrial Disputes," Hunt's "The Trade Union Woman" and Henderson's "Citizens in Industry."