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THE TOTTERING BLOCK HOUSE OF CULTURE

WHO has not watched a child build a house of blocks? And who has not seen the structure fall when more and more blocks were thoughtlessly added? The added blocks may, all of them, be pretty, but their effect on the whole structure is detrimental.

In this simple everyday incident lies a parable for those interested in the purveying—or in the preservation—of culture. Is it not true that no man or woman can play a respectable part in the work of the world, whether in business, profession, labor, or the home—can take the minimum of outdoor exercise required for health—and can at the same time acquire even the thinnest, most transparent veneer of culture—as it is offered today by its various vociferous promoters? Is it not true that students in high school and college are confronted with more masterpieces and with the names of more creators of masterpieces than they can possibly become profitably familiar with in the time at their disposal?

Let art and architecture, music and the rest be ruled out as not germane to this inquiry, and let the inquiry be confined to imaginative literature. Here alone, the amount—even of the thoroughly worthy—is so appalling as to turn back any save the most intrepid adventurer. Almost any reference book or high school or college textbook—except a few which are fortunately limited to “chief,” “major,” “leading,” or “great” writers—will serve as an example. A circular advertising a useful reference work, *British Authors of the Nineteenth Century*, lays claim to the book's including a thousand authors! How many are there then worthy of similar serious biographical and bibliographical treatment in Britain be-

fore 1800 and since 1900—and how many are there in literature produced in English on this side of the Atlantic? The sum total could scarcely be under four or five thousand! In perfect fairness let it be emphasized that the book under discussion is a work of general reference rather than a text or a trade publication. Yet it is symptomatic. An ably edited and widely used sophomore anthology offers busy young American collegians actual representative selections from the works of 194 writers prominent in the “literature of England.” A currently popular book offers high school students 124 writers in the same field. Again, a carefully edited recent anthology offers to American college sophomores selections from the works of fifty-nine presumably important authors of Victorian England. In the first and second instances add a corresponding number of American authors; in the second instance, add not only the Americans but the Englishmen from other periods, and the student is confronted by a minimum of perhaps four hundred English and American authors whose work he is supposed to know. And the four hundred names do not include the sovereigns, statesmen and other men of affairs, the artists, musicians, and scientists, and foreign authors so influential in English that some knowledge of their work is necessary to understanding important classics in English.

But the anthologies referred to are not exceptional—they are typical of the inclusive anthology. And the textbooks on literature conform. The admirable history of English literature by John Buchan—good novelist and, as Lord Tweedsmuir, Governor-General of Canada—contains more than 3000 authors and titles deemed sufficiently worthy to be listed in the index to the volume.

The truth is that critics—academic and otherwise—have been adding names to the roster of culture according to the hobby or the specialty or the whim or the faith of the critic with no regard for culture as a unit—national or otherwise—and with no regard to changes wrought by the passing of the years.

As Henry Adams pointed out in his *Education*, change in human events can be best gauged by fixing two points in time and then studying the straight line determined by them. In the present instances, let the two points in time be 1906 and 1939—two years a third of a century apart.

In 1906 an American to have a minimum of culture—as gauged by required college courses in literature—was supposed to know books and their authors to a number which may here be recorded by the algebraic symbol x . In 1939—as the most cursory glance at the textbooks will show—he is supposed to know all of x —plus a great many old books and plays (here to be referred to as y) resurrected by the recent effort of specialists, plus (here to be referred to as z) a reasonable amount of good literature, British and American, produced in the last third of a century.

In other words the culture aspirant of 1906 had to read x , whereas his or her son or daughter in 1939 has to read $x+y+z$.

The 1939 formula $x+y+z$ would be frightening—even if there were no complications. But the world has changed to a degree stunning to those who remember '06—and unrealizable to those born since. The automobile with its monopoly of time was hardly a factor in 1906; in so far as it was known at all in most parts of the country it was a rattling chain-driven curiosity. Radio broadcasting was unknown. And motion pictures were not yet being offered to the general American public.

The 1939 aspirant for culture is forced then to pursue his $x+y+z$ in an environment filled with distractions undreamed of by his predecessor who had enough to do

with x three and thirty years before. But motor cars are here to stay; radio has programs no one can afford to miss; and the recently perfected talking picture, despite its propaganda, is a valuable factor in education and instruction in the middle third of the century.

Time will not stand still—much less move backward. With the car, the radio, the cinema—and, for collegians, the lures of ever more widespread co-education and “working one’s way”—the time left for literature is less by far than in '06—yet the student is offered more. The club-woman is offered more. All aspirants for culture are offered $x+y+z$ —when they have no time for even as much as x was in '06.

The situation is perilous—for culture. Patently unable to approach the minimum required for being “cultured”—one pretends indifference and turns to bridge or some other unfortunate hobby. The old affectation of “nil admirari”—“to admire nothing”—comes back with a vengeance. One doesn’t admire—or wonder at—the classics of the race; one doesn’t even scorn them. Worst of all, one is unaware of them.

Now a nation needs the stimulus and the unity which are fostered by a common culture. And culture flourishes best if a talker’s reference to a great character or passage stirs a remembering glow in the listener’s mind. Literary culture demands that the hearer understand when one refers to Beowulf, Macbeth, or Tam O’Shanter, that all the adult partners to a talk know such lines as Milton’s:

Virtue could see to do what virtue would
By her own radiant light though sun and moon
Were in the flat sea sank...

or Pope’s:

Act well your part: there all the honor lies.

The present ignorance of the finest expressions of the finest thought of the race is then perilous. But what is to be done? A solution of the problem is to be found only in a drastic reduction of supposedly

classic literature—literature which a cultured person is presumed to have read. Let us then look again at our formula $x+y+z$, with the idea of subtracting from it.

First and foremost, z must be retained. In the welter of books produced by writers living or recently dead, it is, of course, hard to make a certain choice; impossible to make one that will be undisputed. Friendship for particular authors, adherence to certain schools of propaganda, honest divergences of taste enter in, to such a degree, that Brander Matthews was partly right in his widely quoted statement that the appraisal of one's contemporaries is not criticism but conversation.

But—hard as it is—the task must be resolutely faced. A work of literary art can to no future generation mean as much as to the sympathetic contemporaries of its author. Holding the “mirror to nature” is more valuable when nature is contemporary. As much as a twentieth century reader reveres the greatness of *Hamlet*, he must know that it means less to him than to the man of three centuries ago for whom its poetry was as good as it is now but to whom ghosts, revenge, and the intrigues within a royal house were lively topics of the day. Likewise, *Paradise Lost*, with its lofty study of the relations of man to woman and of the twain to God, remains the chief monument of our literature; but it meant even more to its own seventeenth century readers for whom no footnotes were needed on the theological and scientific passages. Surely it would have been tragic for the best minds of the seventeenth century to have missed the new works, *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost*.

The principle holds good for the twentieth century. However much one reveres the great classics, one must admit the necessity of reading some of the good literature of the last third of a century. Shaw's *Arms and the Man* and *Major Barbara*; Barrie's *What Every Woman Knows*, *Dear Brutus*, *The Admirable Crichton*, and

Farewell, Miss Julie Logan; the lyrics of William Butler Yeats; a substantial body of the prose and poetry of Kipling; the timeless plays and stories of Lord Dunsany; the Father Brown stories and some of the poems of G. K. Chesterton; the youthful, humorous books of P. G. Wodehouse; Galsworthy's *The Patrician*; something from Milne, De La Mare, and the poet laureate, Masfield—are not these obligatory from Britain—and might not the list be easily extended? From America too, must not one beyond question read many of the poems of Frost and Robinson, Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, a few plays by George Kelly; the public addresses of Nicholas Murray Butler; the stimulating and independent criticism of William Lyon Phelps, and—finally—a few works by the Nobelmen, Lewis and O'Neill, if only to make up one's mind whether the laurel-wreaths on their “idealism” are European jibes at America?

Yes—and more, too!

We must then conserve z in our formula, limiting it to the best, according to the ablest judgment we can find to follow.

With y , the problem is easier. The old works of literature—dead in 1906 and dug up since with a teapot tempest of rediscovery and repopularization by some specialist—should all be relegated to the oblivion whence they were rescued. In 1931 Witter Bynner edited *The Sonnets of Frederick Goddard Tupperman*. In a review of the volume, the writer of this paper wrote:

As archive material or Ph.D., dissertation material, Mr. Bynner's book deserves all praise. With the statement that Tupperman “is a poet permanently important in any literature” Mr. Bynner enters, however, upon debatable ground. Why should the “general reader” trouble himself with Tupperman's poems? Easily found are numerous better poems on the same themes. A few years ago the American Rose Society urged its members not to give the public any more “new” red roses unless the new ones were actually superior in some way to existing red roses. Is there not a suggestion here for teachers, editors, and book reviewers? Twenty-five years ago col-

lege students and others presuming toward culture were supposed to know all the books known by the past generation *plus* numerous notable recent books *plus* such rediscoveries as this by Mr. Bynner. Now literary culture is like a child's block house. If too many blocks are used, the structure falls. But one must beyond question read some of the good poetry written by one's contemporaries. Is it not then the critic's task to diminish judiciously rather than increase the amount of literature to be read by the "general reader"—particularly in the still unweeded garden of the years 1800-1900?

In other words the present-day world is interested in Mr. Bynner—or any fellow of his—if he can give us great original work, or if he can lead us more surely to a proper appreciation of the masters of the past. But a deaf ear must be turned when anyone cries out the rediscovery of an old poet less worthy than his fellows or his successors. Let the scholars have him, let the hobby-men have him, but do not pretend that a knowledge of him is essential to the possession of American culture. And this goes even for the re-emphasis currently placed on the writings of such minor masters of the past as Donne and Blake. From the $x+y+z$ formula, y is then to be completely excluded—unless, of course, there is a truly great discovery such as that of *Beowulf* in the nineteenth century.

With x comes the important problem. The goal is to have English-speaking people read and receive strength and guidance and joy from the great classics of the race. The value lies not only in possession, but in common possession. But the likelihood of people knowing the same masterpieces is lessened if the supposed body of common culture classics is too large to read—in fact, as stated above, the likelihood of knowing any masterpieces, much less the same ones, is decidedly lessened if the field is large enough to discourage entry.

The x in the formula must then be decidedly reduced. The idea is nothing new. Few readers of this page could name a book written between 1200 and 1300, for instance; but books were written then in abundance. These books, however, have been wisely rejected—thrown from the

field of the classics. Similarly, the many long poems of the century between 1400 and 1500 are in the discard. Even in more recent centuries, such once awe-inspiring names as Cowley, Denham, and Garth are dead—as are all the laureates of the eighteenth century to and including Pye. Repeated injections of the pallid blood of favorable academic appraisal is keeping too many dramatists of the years 1590-1700 barely alive, but rejection in literature has in general been fairly well accomplished down to 1800. And this rejection was accomplished before 1900. As the 19th century neared its end the laureates of the 18th were as dead as they are nearly a half-century later.

Now by the same laws of analogy and reason, rejection by 1939 should have been effected similarly for the years 1800-1839, but such is not the case. The garden of romanticism has not been pruned. It has not even been weeded. And the aspirant for culture today is offered almost the whole respectable output of the early 19th century—down to the accession of Victoria in 1837—instead of the sorted best.

In reducing x then, we should first turn ourselves resolutely to the Romantic period and throw overboard much that we have been schooled to regard as classic. Excellent as is some of their work, we must forget Campbell, Southey, Rogers, Peacock, Hazlitt, DeQuincey, and others of their degree of excellence.

But of the "six great poets," Wordsworth, Scott, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats—can all be kept?

This is the main point. Here the case will be won or lost. Wordsworth is inevitable. Every Englishman and American, whether he knows it or not, is Wordsworthian in greater or less degree. Like underground streams of water the ideas of Wordsworth run in our minds. Scott must be retained: he exerted a vast influence on English, American, and Continental literature, and school children of today love his

verse narratives—as well as his novels. Keats is likewise of lasting importance—intrinsically for restoring the Miltonic purple to English poetry, and also for his influence on Tennyson and Rossetti and on imagism wherever it has since flourished. But the others—Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley—should go. All will be remembered at least throughout the twentieth century for their six or eight best short pieces—even as Lovelace and Suckling are still remembered. But let them now be rejected as far as their whole message for the whole body of readers is concerned. Let Coleridge linger in the notes on Wordsworth—not otherwise—except for the lyrics already “passed.” Except for his glorious rhetorical lyrics and the best descriptive passages in *Childe Harold*, III and IV, Byron is already dead. Shelley will be remembered because his *Adonais* is on Keats, and for his eight best lyrics. Are more necessary?

With the prose-writers an even more drastic cut might be effected. Should any Romantic essayist except Lamb be still regarded as important in the stream of English culture? And in the novel should anyone be added to the poet-novelist Scott except Jane Austen whom Sir Jack Squire calls “the first perfect novelist and in many respects still the greatest of them all. . . .?”

With the Romantic period reduced to Wordsworth, Scott, Keats, Lamb, and Austen, what a boost culture would receive! How the literary traveler lost in the “tropical forest of Romanticism”—the phrase is again Squire’s—would hail the chart to the five greatest goals of his adventure. Would not everyone rush to master the five writers—if an agreement on the five could be achieved? And how the stock of culture, common, would soar upward if readers really knew the works of these four great men and this great woman!

But what of the writers of the Victorian period? A hint may be drawn from the recent history of redistricting the states for representation in Congress. Congress is

supposed to allocate congressional representation according to population on the basis of each decennial census, but as no reallocation was effected in 1920, the reallocation in 1930 covered twice the normal period. Likewise since nearly a half century has seen no discarding, the Victorian period may be trimmed along with the period of Romanticism. But, as the Victorian period is closer to the middle third of the twentieth century, the pruning will have to be less close. Perhaps seventeen Victorian writers should be saved as classics.

In the field of poetry Tennyson and Browning are impregnable. Tennyson was the voice of his age, and Browning remains unsurpassed for his compact dramatic presentations of character. To these should be added Austin Dobson, the Shakespeare of his field, the pleasant field of light verse. Swinburne is still a challenge in matters of technique. Though Rossetti is a doubtful case, his images will perhaps save him. But all the other poets should go. Arnold with his piteous cry; Clough, who never quite rang the bell anyhow; Morris, damned by his own accurate phrase, “the idle singer of an empty day”; Christina Rossetti, despite the excellence of some of her poems for children, for Milne’s are better; Mrs. Browning, though a few may still cling to her love-sonnets; and the others who held sway in the middle third of the century: the fire of their messages has gone out, and they should be ready to depart. What indeed have any of them to offer to the middle third of the twentieth century?

In prose the novels of Dickens show signs of being alive forever. Thackeray, Eliot, Hardy, and Meredith will surely live at least a little longer in a few novels each. The others must go. And let the non-fiction prose be cut drastically too—a further lease on life being granted only to those writers (perhaps Carlyle, Ruskin, Mill, Huxley, and Newman) that are necessary for a proper understanding of the twentieth century.

Two playwrights need to be saved: Tom

Robertson whose *Caste* took up the thread of English drama where Sheridan dropped it in the eighteenth century, and the inimitable W. S. Gilbert who lifted light opera into the realm of high art and—along with Dickens—is perhaps the most vitally alive of any writer from the years 1830-1890.

Saved then are five poets; five novelists; five other prose writers; two dramatists—for a total of seventeen, though, of course, another list—and doubtless a better one might be made which might include as few as a dozen names—or as many as twenty.

But let us stick to the figure seventeen. Too many—for the theory of necessary rejection? No! For it must be remembered that the Victorian Age is much nearer than the Romantic is. And, in any case, seventeen is a happier number than the fifty or more offered at present by those who seek to purvey the culture of the reign of Victoria.

Is reduction to seventeen too drastic, with reference to the accepted canons of today? Yes! But no prohibition is to be laid on persons who wish to read Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*, Bulwer-Lytton's *Richelieu*, Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* and all the rest of the good minor classics of the Age of Victoria. But henceforth, let not a mastery of these and like works be deemed essential to the possession of a common culture.

In conclusion, let it be stressed that nothing arbitrary is intended by this paper. If Shelley and Leigh Hunt should be added to the list and Lamb dropped, the author would voice no protest. Nor would he militantly oppose the throwing overboard of Swinburne and Rossetti and the rescuing of Arnold. The point is that the nineteenth century must have its hundred or so writers of masterpieces drastically reduced—to a dozen or two—if, in general, the people who constitute America are going to pay any attention to them as masterpieces.

The nineteenth century is the test case. If it can be successfully trimmed, the num-

ber of blocks in the block house of literary culture need not be so great that the structure will fall.

JOHN O. BEATY

EDUCATION IN A DEMOCRACY

A DESCRIPTIVE STATEMENT OF THE PRESENT STATUS OF EDUCATION IN AMERICA, WITH SOME ANALYSIS OF PROGRESS TO THE PRESENT

EDUCATION is an undertaking so thoroughly accepted in the United States of America that we would not know how to go on without it on some such basis as at present. There are, however, as many kinds of notions about the operation of the system of schools and the products of operation as there are people affected. It is appropriate to take stock of the educational establishment from time to time to see what we have and how we come to be that way.

I. Some Signs of the Times

Where schools are so generally carried on, there must be some fundamental agreements which all accept. At least some tacit understanding of main principles must exist. What things distinguish American education? A few elementary points are here stated as they seem to apply in the present.

1. *There is public demand.* Education has become the American way. Being "born free and equal" has come to mean just as much the opportunity to get an education as the enjoyment of certain political privileges and immunities. Education is an important figure in the pattern of any life, a definite step up the hill in the direction of success, an open sesame to all the closed doors for every youth possessing it. It matters not that education does not seem to light a rosy path for some youngsters, and that there is some sniping along many fronts by honest or dishonest agitators who see the shortcomings of the schools. These