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HENRY BELLAMANN, COMIC CRITIC

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Henry Bellamann was born in Fulton, Missouri, in 1882, and died in New York City in 1945. In the course of his sixty-three years he undertook a number of endeavors, and frequently succeeded. Although he lacked an earned degree in music, he rose up the academic ranks to serve as professor of musicology at Vassar, chairman of the examining board at Juilliard, and dean of the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. Within a span of twenty-three years he published three volumes of poetry, seven novels—one of which, *Kings Row*, was a best-seller and became a popular film starring Ronald Reagan—and dozens of scholarly articles on such subjects as philately, psychology, and his imagined joys in translating Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Here, however, I shall focus my attention upon another aspect of Henry Bellamann's writing career. In his becoming a recognized music scholar early in this century, he had held several teaching posts at small liberal arts schools throughout the South—in Texas, Alabama, and Tennessee. But his longest tenure was the seventeen years he spent on the faculty of Chicora College in Columbia, South Carolina, now known as Queen's College in Charlotte, North Carolina. In his final year at Chicora, 1923, Bellamann was approached by the editor of the *Columbia Record* newspaper to serve as its literary critic. He accepted the post, and continued to write weekly columns even after he had moved to New York and Philadelphia. In 1929 he became fine arts editor of the *Record's* sister newspaper, *The State*, and in 1934 took a similar position with the *Charlotte (North Carolina) Observer*, writing book reviews until 1937. What follows are some samples of Bellamann's often-witty literary critiques, which I like to think I've rescued from undeserved oblivion after more than a half-century.

From columns written in 1925 and 1926, we read these progressive sentiments:

This is the age of sex liberation in literature. We may not like the changes that have come about in these later times. Most people around 50 do not. That doesn't matter much—the changes are here, and must be understood and coped with in some way. It is useless to hold up hands of horror and call for a return of the ways of a bygone day.... We are not hampered and weighed down by tradition. Unless the slimy evil of censorship does its dangerous work, we shall

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come through this period of literary bad words into a full and frank discussion of life. If too much pressure is put upon us by crusaders for what they believe to be purity in letters, we shall become incurably obscene, like little boys who learn much of life in whispers behind the barn.¹

On another occasion he playfully condemned the poetic efforts of the Objectivists, nudging *Poetry* magazine editor Harriet Monroe for turning over her "doughty little periodical" to the Objectivists for one issue. Bellamann quipped:

This literary page has always been hospitable to new stuff in whatever field of art it appears. But it has been *enthusiastic* only when the conviction was present that talent of whatever kind was present.

The poetry of the Objectivists impresses this writer as being completely silly. But what is far worse is the all-too-clear influence and imitation of James Joyce, of Gertrude Stein, and of others who have not counted intelligibility a virtue.²

And while praising such poets as Amy Lowell, Wallace Stevens, and Carl Sandburg, Bellamann could jab at Ezra Pound in this manner:

Ezra Pound, who might have been an original, has contented himself with being a derivative. He is heard from in every issue of the *Transatlantic Review*. Ezra broke out recently with an article having to do with what he considered new and radical ideas on harmony and musical composition. He succeeded in making himself out a more gorgeous ass than usual.³

This unfavorable commentary, given Pound's reputation then (1924) and now, places Bellamann in an anti-intellectual camp. As the acknowledged leader of the Imagist movement in poetry, Pound should logically have commanded the respect of Bellamann, who regarded himself as an Imagist poet. Michael Alexander notes that Pound's "notorious allusiveness" makes much of his poetry appear inaccessible, although it is a "misconception that he is a poet available only to the learned...."⁴

Of contemporary British novelists Bellamann penned the following lines:

James Joyce, who wrote the stupendous *Ulysses*, is truly more talked about than read. This condition is very true of certain other important modernists.⁵

Speaking of uninteresting books—there is D. H. Lawrence. Mr. Lawrence is one of the distinguished Englishmen who has been rediscovering us lately. He rewards us with a complete new set of valuations and tells us all about our writers, old and new, which ones were good and which were cave men—I believe the terms are synonymous with him. But I cannot forget, while I read this cocksure estimate, the slough of dullness I wallowed through trying to discover why his *Women in Love* was suppressed. Had I been in any position of authority it would certainly have been suppressed as...the most uninteresting book in the English language, with possibly one exception.⁶

A week later, Bellamann's disgust with Lawrence reached the breaking point:

Among the books I should not like to read are all of those which are to be written by D. H. Lawrence. America, big, bustling America, the upstanding youth among nations, always becomes supine when an Englishman comes over to tell us what is wrong with us. I wonder what would happen to Sherwood Anderson if he should go to England and run rough-shod over that island and its inhabitants. I fancy one thing would happen—what he thought wouldn't be printed.

I suspect that Mr. Lawrence's audience here is considerably larger than his English audience. He somehow doesn't sound like a success in his own home town.

One thing is certain, though it may not be of world-shaking importance. This paragraph marks his exit from this column.⁷

One cannot here call Bellamann's labeling Joyce and "other important modernists" among the unfortunate lot of writers "more talked about than read" an anti-intellectual position. Then (1925) as now, authors popularly perceived as "obscure" or "difficult" experience widespread neglect *except* in academe. It is to be hoped that Bellamann, in dubbing *Ulysses* "stupendous," had read the book and thus was writing with qualification. Otherwise, we should consider him a hypocrite.

However, with regard to D. H. Lawrence, the passage of time has shown Bellamann's opinions to be unreasonably harsh. Dennis Jackson and Fleda Brown Jackson record that the novelist was "often

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severely undervalued as an artist during his lifetime." They cite steady growth in Lawrence scholarship since the 1950's as proof of his merit as an author.⁸

Bellamann enjoyed a lively correspondence with his regular readers in the South. Most often they wrote asking him to suggest good books they should read. Some mailed him manuscripts for his evaluation. Still others simply sought advice about writing and publishing. When a young author wrote that he wanted to read the books Bellamann had been recommending because he felt that those works "would be a help in the formation of a solid style," although he lacked the time to read, Bellamann retorted,

[He should] try the Old Testament. It's first rate. Some of the greatest stories in the world are there, condensed into half a paragraph.⁹

Just as Bellamann could fill "The Literary Highway" with witty encouragements for would-be writers, so could he as we have seen employ withering sarcasm to deride arrogance and what he regarded as poor writing. He spent the major portion of one column complaining about the 1930 edition of *Who's Who Among North American Authors*. He blasted the *Who's Who* editors for omitting the names of Carl Sandburg and of Julia Peterkin, the obscure South Carolina novelist and Bellamann's former pupil who had won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in the previous year, but for including the name of Homer Rodeheaver, evangelist Billy Sunday's song leader. In a purely sardonic vein Bellamann launched into an original review of the volume:

Any biographical dictionary such as this *Who's Who Among North American Authors* furnishes mine after mine of interesting, amusing, and pathetic sidelights on human endeavor and human ambition.

Turning at random through the pages one sees again and again such a biographical sketch as this:

Agatha Underwood Farquharson, born So-&-So, Massachusetts, 1880; A.B., A.M., Ph.D., L.L.D.; author of *Irrigation in Uruguay*, etc., etc. Nine times out of 10 there stands at the conclusion of such record the ominous word—"unmarried."

Or: Samuel Friarson Bridgefoot, and then a string of degrees, author of *Irregular Endings in the Minor Greek Poets*, two volumes, Blank University Press.

Or: Elijah Abner Quigline, pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church at Cross Roads,

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Tennessee. Author of *Games for Sunday School Picnics*.

An American Chekov would find his material ready-to-hand in the pages of these hardy annuals.¹⁰

Another column, devoted exclusively to South Carolina writers, saw Bellamann ridicule unmercifully the anachronistic diction of the characters in E. C. McCants's obscure historical romance, *Ninety-Six*. The comic critic wrote:

It is hard for this reviewer to believe that the people of Revolutionary days spoke in the idiom utilized by the author which is more of Shakespeare's day than of the late 18th century.

For instance: "Colonel Cruger, ye know this man Poston, and hath employed him aforetime. He hath just arrived from Augusta.... He telleth me Browne is beleagured by Clarke and requireth instant aid."

Gadzooks and 'odsblood, we can't believe it was spoken in this wise in the 1770's.¹¹

While Bellamann's flashes of humor in his newspaper articles are not of the obvious, sustained character found in the writings of his contemporaries—those of Robert Benchley, Will Rogers, S. J. Perelman, James Thurber, E. B. White, and Dorothy Parker—it is still evident that Bellamann was not a dour, snobbish critic. Furthermore, except for his assaults on *Who's Who* and Lawrence, his witticisms seldom assume a cruel or malicious tone. After Bellamann had chided fellow critic H. L. Mencken's characterizing the South in the wake of World War I as a cultural wasteland, the literary editor could note graciously, in an aside penned parenthetically in 1932,

(Incidentally Mr. Mencken has since married, settled into softer utterances regarding everything, and seems likely to remain in his present pleasant eclipse.)¹²

I close on a more serious note. Since Henry Bellamann's death his name has almost vanished. The biographies of some of his friends and close acquaintances—Evelyn Scott, Carl Sandburg, and Paul Robeson, to name only three—contain no mention of him. To call Henry Bellamann a great poet, critic, or novelist would be a mistake. He was none of these. But to ignore the position he established for himself in literary circles would be a more crucial error. He grew up in a small Midwestern town, achieved distinction in music, literature, and criticism on a wide scale, and then was forgotten. I contend that

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Bellamann's writings, especially his critical assessments—whether wrong (his preference for the more traditional New England verse of Edwin Arlington Robinson over that of Robert Frost may illuminate or explain his dissatisfaction with Pound's poems), humorous, or otherwise—can still speak to us with validity, and warrant thoughtful examination.

NOTES

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¹Quoted by Thomas L. Johnson, "Henry Bellamann And His Columbia Connection," *The Columbia Record*, 6 May 1982, n.p.

²"The Literary Highway," *The State*, 8 February 1931, p. 22, cols. 1-2.

³"The Literary Highway," *The Sunday Record*, 11 May 1924, p. 5, cols. 1-3.

⁴Michael Alexander, *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley, 1979), p. 19.

⁵"The Literary Highway," *The Sunday Record*, 4 January 1925, p. 5, cols. 1-3.

⁶"The Literary Highway," *The Sunday Record*, 4 November 1923, p. 5, cols. 1-3.

⁷"The Literary Highway," *The Sunday Record*, 11 November 1923, p. 5, cols. 1-3.

⁸David Jackson and Fleda Brown Jackson, eds., *Critical Essays on D. H. Lawrence* (Boston, 1988), pp. 1, 2, 7-44.

⁹"The Literary Highway," *The State*, 25 May 1930, p. 41, cols. 1-2.

¹⁰"The Literary Highway," *The State*, 5 January 1930, p. 29, cols. 1-2.

¹¹"The Literary Highway," *The State*, 4 May 1930, p. 41, cols. 1-2.

¹²"The Literary Highway," *The State*, 20 November 1932, p. 9B, cols. 1-2.