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Henry A. Beers (1847-1926)

THE friends of Professor Beers of Yale will remember an urbanity not of our time and a wisdom less worldly than ours. He was not, in spite of a long list of books, a famous man outside of his own university. Offices and medals were not offered him; he never sought, and never loved, publicity, even on the lips of his pupils and associates. And yet there was a magic in the man's contacts not easy to account for although his extraordinary knowledge of literature and his gift for imparting enthusiasm to the elect were enough to make him distinguished. He was, it is true, almost the last of that fellowship of American men of letters who were makers of literature as well as its students: he belonged with Emerson, Lowell, Longfellow, Thoreau; although their junior he retained in an age of specialization that interest in all knowledge in his province which was congenital among the scholars of the golden age of New England. Yet to his students the classic school of New England was only a faded tradition whereas Beers, even though his eyes were dim and his voice sepulchral, was a present phenomenon, a man to whom literature and life were one and indivisible, who chanted from *The Faerie Queene* and knew the latest novels, who had read everything, taught everything in English *belles lettres*, and did not care if his coat was rusty or his life tethered to his work, provided he could keep his imagination warm at the fires which great minds had kindled before him. The open secret was his culture. He was that man of perfect culture which all scholars and all teachers of literature should be, and so seldom are. His students felt the genial warmth when after a mumbled lecture (he read his lectures intolerably from peered-at notes) the rich mind would warm to comment and the stooped shoulders and puckered brows be forgotten in the charm of his smile; they came to idle and went away to praise.

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Henry Beers earned his niche in the history of American scholarship. His two books on the romantic movement in English cleared the way through that tangle, and plotted the beginnings of the trails, his compact histories of literature were models from which many a subsequent brief study was built. Yet it is not with the scholars that he will sit in the Elysian fields if there is good talk among the poets, the critics, and the tellers of tales. Life was always more to him than history, and art than science. He spent, very literally, his middle age amidst that passion for research which for good and for ill came raging into the American universities from Germany. He had done few things in pure literature then, but those rare, some poetry, some fiction, one book, "The Ways of Yale," which belongs in the first rank of memorabilia of college life. But the turn of the century was set against literary reputations in English departments. Scholarship was asked of him and scholarship he gave, and did not court the muse again until old age had come upon him, then in essays and in poetry showed us how much we had lost. A man of letters had been disciplined by circumstance into a professor of English, but routine and the assiduity of scholarship could only bind his talents.

When his literary work in art and criticism is sifted, and the substance freed from accident, it will be seen that he belongs with those creative writers who have written little but that little excel-

Shadow in the Roof

By EDWARD DAVISON

IN the roof, while the firelight played there,
My shadow was thrown;
Gaunt and aloof it swayed there,
A weary figure it made there,
Glooming alone.

As I in that moment, benighted,
Looked up from the hearth,
Being one no longer excited
By any fire I had lighted
To brighten the earth. . . .

O would that the shadow that haunted
Those rafters had shown
Some sign of a heart less daunted
By the making of fires unwanted
Than my own.

The State of Poetry

By ROBERT GRAVES

WHAT is the state of English poetry today? I would suggest that among the low-brow public—readers of say *Tit-Bits*, E. M. Hull, A. S. M. Hutchinson, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Gene Stratton Porter—poetry is in a poor way. John Oxenham has had a success but minute in proportion with his potential public. The causes are not obscure; this is the public created by elementary education; elementary education has been a by-product of industrialism and is aimed not at a humaner culture but at raising the industrial and civic efficiency of the masses. Poetry as it has been taught in the elementary schools in years gone by has, therefore, not encouraged many children on leaving school to continue their acquaintance with it; but novels and stories have formed no part of the curriculum and can therefore be read without prejudice. The mezzo-brow public has had usually two or three years of schooling more than the low-brow public, and reads more respectably; it corresponds closely with the middle class and is educated for the higher commercial groups of industrialism.

Open any one of the better monthly magazines of fiction: each story, though it falls short of literature with a capital L, is thoroughly workmanlike. It has a definite point to which it moves easily and economically; the characters, unless the story is definitely a farce, are convincing, the local color is carefully applied. In two cases out of three a considerable demand is made on the reader's observation and memory for slight clues to the *dénouement*, occurring in the first page of the story, and even when the *dénouement* comes, it comes quietly, perhaps in a single word, a mere gesture, by which the reader who has not cultivated the "short-story sense" will be completely baffled. But whereas the art of the short story has advanced enormously in the course of the last thirty years, and the intelligence of the short-story reader with it, the general run of verse that we find occasionally sandwiched between short stories in these magazines is as banal, nerveless, and amateur as could well be imagined.

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Now the difference is, there is a genuine and sincere demand for the short story on its own account. The question "is it literature?" does not arise. There is no such demand for verse. Its appearance at all in a shilling magazine is only a survival from the days before modern education and the short-story boom, when poetry was really read and enjoyed by the upper-middle-classes, the days when crowds queued up for a new canto of "Don Juan" and a publisher could offer Thomas Moore 3,000 guineas advance royalties for "Lalla Rookh." The publishing of poetry in volume form is similarly a mere window-dressing, a graceful tribute to the past, a sop to literature: but not a business proposition. The mezzo-brow attitude toward the poet has since the boom days become a most unhealthy one: it is like that of modern youth toward its parents, a sentiment that has gradually changed after a series of disappointments and misunderstandings from affectionate respect to scorn and indifference.

There is nothing wrong with poetry in itself; as there is nothing wrong with parenthood itself; both are inevitable forms of life; but the claim of a certain generation of parents to regulate the lives of their growing sons and daughters according to a

This Week



"Historians' History of the World." Reviewed by *William Macdonald*.
"Conquest of New England." Reviewed by *Henry P. Fairchild*.
"Letters of Louise Imogen Guiney." Reviewed by *Bliss Carman*.
"The Romantic Comedians." Reviewed by *Henry Seidel Canby*.
"Through Many Windows." Reviewed by *Charles Denhard*.
"Tampico." Reviewed by *Gladys Graham*.
"The Unearthly." Reviewed by *Ernest Sutherland Bates*.
"Fairy Gold." Reviewed by *H. W. Boynton*.
Lines Written in a Bad Temper. By *Stella Benson*.

Next Week, or Later

"The World of William Clissold." Reviewed by *Mary M. Colum*.

lent. Yet hundreds of books can claim him as foster father or nurse. He was no clapper on the back of literary aspirants. His diet was Donne and Milton and Thackeray and Emerson and Shaw and the Roman poets, and if modern ambition would not stand companionship with bold fellows of an earlier time let it not be brought to him. A gentleman and a scholar, so he thought, might write badly through inaptness but could only desire to write freely and well. The bickerings of literary jealousy meant nothing to him; popular reputations or the aura of vast journalistic rewards dazzled him no more than bombs in a fireworks show. The youngster who came to him to learn how to live by litera-

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traditional method cannot be met when that method is unsuited to the changed conditions of life. These sons and daughters will, however, soon marry and become parents themselves, however strongly they disapprove of parenthood; and poetry like parenthood is an instinct that cannot be long repressed.

It is again largely because of an educational system which links poetry up with geometry and French as "subjects to be done"—and to be "done" in school is to be "done-for" in private life—that poetry is viewed with as great suspicion by the intellectual middle-classes as by their social inferiors. The pulpit has assisted in deepening this suspicion. The poet always, it is thought, has a sinister design on the reader. Either he is trying to put over a spiritual or historical message of some dry sort, or he is claiming genius and its anti-social privileges; in any case he is drawing the reader from the quiet paths of enjoyable reading to the stern mountain of literature; a region from which one customarily returns jaded, if improved, to impress other travelers with a satchel full of poetic specimens, chipped from the hard rocks and carefully ticketed. This mistrust of the poet ensures that, dead poets only being "done" in schools and universities, living poets cannot economically practice the art for a livelihood. Patronage is dead these two hundred years, and the high-brow public is not large enough to support its poets by casual purchase of their wares. The result is that the writing of poetry is now largely in the hands of gifted young amateurs who publish a single book and then leave poetry for the more serious and remunerative work of prose, of idlers with money who want a literary reputation and find a series of lyrics less fatiguing to produce than a novel; and of retired judges, ambassadors, and heads of colleges and such who crown their career with a volume of graceful verse. People in fact who encourage, rather than dispel the lack of confidence in poetry; so that it is next to impossible for a serious practising poet to get a hearing from the middle-class public which is numerically large from the low-brow public which could afford to support dozens of poets, and still less make them all men of wealth.



The public that is acquiring a short-story sense, and a film sense, and a fast-traffic sense, and a radio-sense is not a dull public; as it is not dull public, neither is it a lazy public. The enthusiasm for the cross-word puzzle and for home-made radio sets prove that. The theory that because industrial, commercial, or professional life weighs so heavy, poetry to make any appeal at all must be a narcotic, can no longer stand. On the contrary the daily round is so routine-ridden that, except where the standard of living is definitely below the poverty line, any stimulant to thought of an adventurous kind is most welcome, though indeed the adventure is bound by economic, ethical, religious, and educational limits. The poetry-sense has not been correspondingly cultivated with these other new senses largely because poetry properly understood makes demands at variance with the utilitarian system of education and life. As a marketable commodity it is in a vicious circle; the less it is wanted the duller it gets, and the duller it gets, the less it is wanted. A young workman cannot afford to apprentice himself to the poetry trade, which is suffering sadly from inefficiency and dilution. In the short-story trade wages are high. Though the goods are machine-cut he has the satisfaction of knowing that they meet a genuine demand. The models improve in speed and finish yearly.

But it would be the greatest mistake to push this metaphor farther, to regard poetry as a sort of perpetual coach-building and fiction as a sort of motor-car industry, to say that a coronation-coach lumbering and heavily gilded, or a smart barouche with armorial designs on the door drawn through the park by a pair of spanking greys, though all very well in their way, cannot be compared for speed, comfort or distinction with a 1925 Rolls Royce. True, language and conditions of life have changed so completely in the last fifty years that the greater part of traditional English poetry is utterly out of date except to scholars; what was once the pride of the roads we now think of as a lumbering coach. But this is my contention:—there is no reason why modern verse should not become to modern prose what the airplane is to the motor car. Properly handled, poetry has certain mechanical advantages over prose: prose can never rise off the ground; it

must keep to the roads or the open country. The low-brow, mezzo-brow, and the backward part even of the high-brow public does not realize this, and will demand an explanation of mechanical theory, if not a demonstration of practice.



Simply put, the intrinsic virtues of poetry are these: Its rhythms, rhymes, and texture have an actual toxic effect on the central nervous system. In the resulting condition, the imaginative powers are quickened and strengthened, voices are heard, images are called up, and various emotions felt of a far greater intensity than in waking life. This toxic effect is of greater or less strength according to the level of mental functioning required, which varies between the more or less sedate thought of day-dreaming and the monstrosities of trance or a deep sleep. The soup tablet firm that puts its advertisement into a rough rhyme

Why does the Huntsman devour the fox so?

Because there is nothing for dinner but Broxo,

and the student who masters his lists of facts by help of a rhymed *memoria technica*, "in 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue," are alike aware of this physiological effect verse has on mental receptivity. But besides the greater vividness of image and strengthening of music, the heightening of receptivity and sensitivity that verse properly handled brings, there is another great contribution, that is the awareness of a whole region of hidden association and implication behind phrases that in prose would be accepted at their face-value.

For instance, the adjective *pettifogging* would in prose be construed merely as the conventional insult for a lawyer. If the same adjective were to be used in poetry qualifying, say, a philosopher, there would be an increased vitality in the word; which thereupon for those aware of its etymology would recall its connection with Fugger, the great continental merchant-banker whose minions, the little fuggers, were so sly at their trade: the philosopher would thus be accused of having a commercial mind and the same attachment to verbal formula and ancient authority as a lawyer. At the same time the "fog" syllable would take on a life of its own; "pettiness" and "fogginess" though conceptions not originally bound up with "pettifogging" would color the lines in which they occurred and mate with the hidden associations of the other words there contained. One of the chief powers of poetry is in the poet's ability to control these hidden or forgotten associations of words while remaining in the toxic condition of which I have spoken, so that they interact in a sense distinct from the face value of the poem, a sense which cannot be understood except by those in the same condition of heightened sensibility. Poetry is able to use both the method of logic and the method of fantastic thought, which is *sensorial hieroglyphic*: and what cannot be expressed by either of these means can be conveyed in the musical side of poetry, the rhythm, rhyme, and texture, which have not, of course, fulfilled their function merely by inducing and maintaining the toxic condition.



This briefly is the theory of poetry as I understand it; but whether and if so, how soon the poetry-sense will appear in a wide circle of readers is another question. I cannot foresee any immediate social or political change that will produce it. A great deal of poetry that has been popularly admired in times past has been admired for reasons unconcerned with the peculiar powers of poetry as I have just outlined them; it has been admired merely for the elegance of the stories it told or the morality of its sentiments or the divine character it professed; and it is doubtful whether in Europe at least there has ever been widely spread a poetry-sense which, once the added receptivity induced by verse has been taken into account, has been distinguishable from a prose-sense. Perhaps some discovery by which food and other necessities of life could everywhere be obtained locally, together with a solution of the population question, might give the necessary background to a national revitalizing of poetry; for England must first be freed from the economic obsession which colors all human relations and qualities today. The difficulties of keeping supplies of food, clothing, and so on in circulation by the authority are now largely smoothed over by standardization of goods and by standardization of the consumers' minds by education and the press. If supplies became more plentiful and decentralization of industry and therefore of standardized mentality be-

came possible, poetry of a greater variety, freedom, and intensity might result. For the standardization of mind has achieved the practical result that the immediate and formal characteristics of any matter under examination, usually recognized in terms of value or efficiency, are alone discerned; other latent characteristics spiritual or personal are generally suppressed as contributing nothing to the mechanic purpose of life.

A Time-Killing Generation

THE THREAT OF LEISURE. By GEORGE BARTON CUTTEN. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1926. \$2.

Reviewed by PHILIP COAN

DR. CUTTEN some three years ago, on his induction as President of Colgate, said some strikingly skeptical things about popular sovereignty and the universal franchise. He seems then to have been performing merely the preliminary slicing through the insensitive epidermis of our ideals. This time, the knife goes right down to the quivering quick; he vivisects our beloved leisure, that treasured share of freedom from needful toil, now possessed by the worker after generations of industrial development and social struggle.

The pleasure of telling painful truths has its temptations but it has not been Dr. Cutten's guiding inspiration. He believes in the potential value of leisure, and accepts the old economic doctrine that the degree of civilization of a human group is a mathematical function of that group's proportion of time free from necessary cares. If he details what he considers the damage done by ill-spent leisure, it is without any purpose of gloomy prediction of an inevitable fate in store for us. Holding that leisure at its worst may bring on social decline, but that put to advantage it should lead to common betterment, he draws the darker alternative rather the more vividly of the two; it is but a way to make the better choice more desirable. One fancies that this motive found its way into the rather grim first noun of the title of his book, "The Threat of Leisure."



The book is a brief for education toward enlarging the average person's ability to make use not chiefly, as under some present educational systems, of his working hours, but rather of his spare time. A new education must be devised, he believes, to render the industrial worker fit to spend several hours a day at liberty. If any task outbulks that of making the world safe for democracy, it must surely be this enormous undertaking of making universal leisure secure from itself.

Dr. Cutten has handled the question so ably, he has opened so many more or less unsuspected windows, that one finds it inevitable to wish that he had handled his topic more completely. A longish essay of some 32,000 words dispensed with due allowance for grace of discourse, can hardly lead to adequate conclusions on so complex a problem. One would welcome an ampler presentation of many features. How much leisure, in aggregate hours, is there in this country today? Surely it would require a painstaking inquiry, and the sifting of much evidence, to determine. But if we knew the answer, we should have a definite idea of the magnitude of the question in its present phase. And among what groups, by age, sex, locality, or social condition, is this unknown quantity of space time variously divided? For all we know, it may chiefly be the idleness of the increasingly numerous and increasingly unemployed folk over fifty. Again, how has leisure affected the powers of survival and development in social classes that have possessed it hitherto? Here is a bearing on the problem surely well worth taking. Is high mental capacity essential to ample living in time free from the compulsion of toil? We need to know, for if leisure spells mere idleness and can spell naught else to the millions in the lower mental brackets, we may be dispensing it wrongly. What study of education for the working masses has already been made? Kallen and others have given much thought to whether cultural education for the worker will work. To consider these and all the other necessary lines and angles in the diagram of an intricate problem would require quite another kind of book, and probably ten times as long a text. Without accusing Dr. Cutten of a predilection for the Squeers methods in the imparting of knowledge, we may respectfully ask for "more."