

# Strictly Personal

## NOTES ON NINE PIONEERS

THE school was ready, but the convent had not been completed.

Contrary to the occasional pastor method of building himself a more stately mansion (oh my soul!) and leaving his outworn dwelling for a community of nuns, the pastor this time had decided to reconstruct the former church for the sisters' home.

It was not ready, but the school had been completed, and the children were rarin' to go; at least the parents were rarin' to get them from underfoot. Would the sisters come anyway, to start their new mission? Yes, they would; but where were they to live? Arrangements could be made.

The owner of a corner house would rent for four months. By that time, the convent would surely be finished and furnished. His little two-story house would hold a chapel, kitchen, refectory, and parlor (named in the order of their importance) and with a little cramping four sisters would also find sleeping accommodations there.

There were nine of us—eight in the originally appointed community, and I. I was supernumerary—appointed to stay at this particular convent because it was convenient to university and library. All I had to do was to help out with a few music lessons, do the secretarial work for the superior, and take the seventh grade about a half hour each day, while the seventh-grade teacher came over to the convent to start preparations for lunch. All the rest of the time, I could work on my dissertation, except when the superior, who was ode-conscious, would ask for rhyme and rhythm to celebrate specific occasions.

Wouldn't I write an ode to be sent to the motherhouse, where they were celebrating Sister Cordelia's golden jubilee? And an ode for the Visitation Nuns, who lived nearby and who had been so kind and sisterly in lending us sacristy equipment? And an ode for the Good Shepherd Nuns, who were giving a play to commemorate the establishment of the Magdalens, and had invited us to witness it and to stay to supper afterwards? I would, and did.

I once saw a cartoon entitled "Circumstances under which a masterpiece is produced." It was a picture of a woman teetering on her chair over a rickety typewriter. A baby on the floor was plucking at her skirts. The

plaster was falling from the ceiling in one corner, and in another a spider was building his winter home and fly-trap. The telephone was ringing. A pot on the kitchen stove was boiling over.

Who was I, then, to complain of distractions? There were no cobwebs, no falling plaster, no baby; and if the pot boiled over and the telephone rang, well, these interruptions sometimes gave a breathing space, during which I recalled a fugitive phrase or fact for which I had been racking my brain.

It was not only the odes that added to my occupations. Once in a while during the dry process of compiling a thesis there would seethe and simmer ideas that simply "must out." And once in a rarer while these ideas were accepted. When that happened the enthusiastic community would spend (in theory) the possible stipend many times over before it was even received.

And we did need money. Like all beginnings, there was not sufficient capital for unforeseen expenses. We had many poor in the parish, and the wealthier members had not yet awakened to the fact that here was a worthy way of making for themselves friends of the mammon of iniquity. One of our members had the hopeful thought of writing to her father for funds, but his reply, stating that when he gave up the pleasure of his daughter's company, he also gave up the privilege of paying her bills, discouraged any further effort along those lines.

Now, with all this digression, I have left the remaining five of us still bedless. I must get to that next. The owner of the grocery store across the street had offered his whole second floor for the use of the sisters; that is, the whole of the second floor that was not taken up with packing cases and excess stock. It was really quite a spacious little dormitory—but there was no bathroom. The sisters in the grocery group heated buckets of water in the temporary convent kitchen, and took them across the street for nightly ablutions at their bedside.

There was not too much inconvenience: the school was on the opposite corner, the church only half a block away, and the whole arrangement was only temporary, anyway. True, the two-story house was equipped for heating with coal, and

no supply of coal had been put in, but surely it would not be needed before the sisters moved to the new convent. "When we move to the new convent" got to be the introduction to many a blissful discussion.

But the cold weather did set in—and then the community was provided with an oil stove—old type, with a circular wick and a tank. It gave forth more odor than heat. Sr. John christened it Sally Smelly. It was a toss-up whether you could stand the cold or the smell; you took turns standing both.

There was other furniture, of course, besides the stove; but not much. And the stove did get a large share of honorable mention because it so persistently declared its presence. There were, for instance, six chairs and one stool. In order to seat the community all at once, we supplemented with a collapsible step ladder and my typewriter case. I, being light of weight, sat on the typewriter case, lest it prove more collapsible than the ladder. Fortunately, the whole seating equipment was portable, hence used in the chapel as prie-dieux, in the refectory as prandial supports, and when a sister had a visitor she brought her own chair and the visitor's chair to the parlor. If the visitor commented on this arrangement, she was invited to contribute toward the furnishing of the convent. The school, of course, was well equipped: plenty of desks and chairs, but they were nailed down.

ONCE when the five in the grocery-store contingent were crossing the street after night prayers, they noticed a dark-cloaked figure that slipped from behind a tree to the corner of the building as they approached. Then they lost sight of him, and, fearing it was some marauder who would waylay them up the dark narrow stairway by the side of the store (they always feared that, even without the presence of the sinister figure), they thought it wise to report to the rectory behind the church. As it happened, the priests were out on sick calls or social calls; only Black Marshal and old Father Brenner were at home. Black Marshal, who answered the door, reported their difficulty to Father Brenner, and the sisters heard his answer: "Tell them I will remember them in my night prayers. They will be safe." So, armored with remembrance in an old priest's night prayers, they proceeded to bed—and were indeed safe.

Came Thanksgiving. Came to Sr. Elizabeth the laudable inspiration to bake a pumpkin pie. But how? The kitchen stove boasted two gas burners and no oven. She found the furnace was the answer. Enough coal was

brought in by the children to kindle the fire and acquire a hot bed of coals. Into the glowing depths she thrust a shovel on which reposed the pie. Of course, the arrangement necessitated her holding it there until the crust was done and the custard congealed. We declared it was the best pie we ever ate.

**T**HE success of her efforts inspired Sr. Chrysostom to make the next dessert—bread pudding. That was practical, because there was lots of bread, and eggs were not too scarce. Lots of bread went into the pudding, too, and it looked as though her generous efforts might furnish dessert for many a day to come, especially as the pudding was somewhat dry and heavy, and only a little bit sufficed. We soon realized that not by bread pudding alone doth man—or maid—live, and we were quite frank in our criticism. She said: "All right, the next time I take pity on you people. . . ." Irrationally, that was all we needed to supply a name for the dessert, and henceforth it was called "pity." We had pity unadorned the first day; we had pity heated over and served with custard the next day; and then for variety we had pity snowed in beneath a top layer of meringue. Finally we served pity to the birds, and the cat, and the neighbor's dog. After that, when Sister Chrysostom offered her services, we found some other job for her to do, and we had apples for dessert.

Shortly after Thanksgiving, the whole parish sprang into activity. It was during the First World War, and the world was short of help, short of materials, short of many things, but the parishioners decided that in our little world there was no excuse for the sisters' living so haphazardly any longer. So the men of the parish contributed their services after their working hours. Partitions were set in place, painters arrived, plumbing was installed. The ladies went over in the daytime to see about curtains and other house-wifely details.

Finally came the day when we were ready to move. The pastor was a man of practical ideas. He went through the school, beginning with the first grade, and dismissed the children, telling them the sisters had to have the day free to move into their new home. And when he got to the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, he suggested that the classes spend their holiday helping the sisters to carry over their goods and effects.

A sort of brigade was formed. The sisters divided their forces, some remaining in the substitute convent to dismantle whatever was portable, the others going over to the new convent to direct the equipment as it arrived.

The main difficulty was to keep the boys from carrying too heavy burdens too quickly—to the damage of their growing muscles as well as to the furniture. They persuaded us, though, that they could actually manage even the beds—in pieces. In order to prevent too great a commingling of parts, the sister-dispatchers labeled the pieces as they were picked up, and the important young voices announced: Sr. John's head; Sr. David's sides; Sr. Regina's foot to the sister-assemblers in the soon-to-be cloistered cells.

So efficiently were things expedited that by noon the moving was done. Then we began really to appreciate the spirit of the parish that had finally begun to appreciate us. Some of the ladies had prepared for us our first meal in the new home. They invaded our kitchen with trays, pots and pans, and frilled aprons. They insisted they were going to do all the work, even the serving, but we assured them that now we were really becoming conventionalized, our partaking of nourishment was a decidedly private affair. We would do the serving ourselves, and then, since they did not mind eating

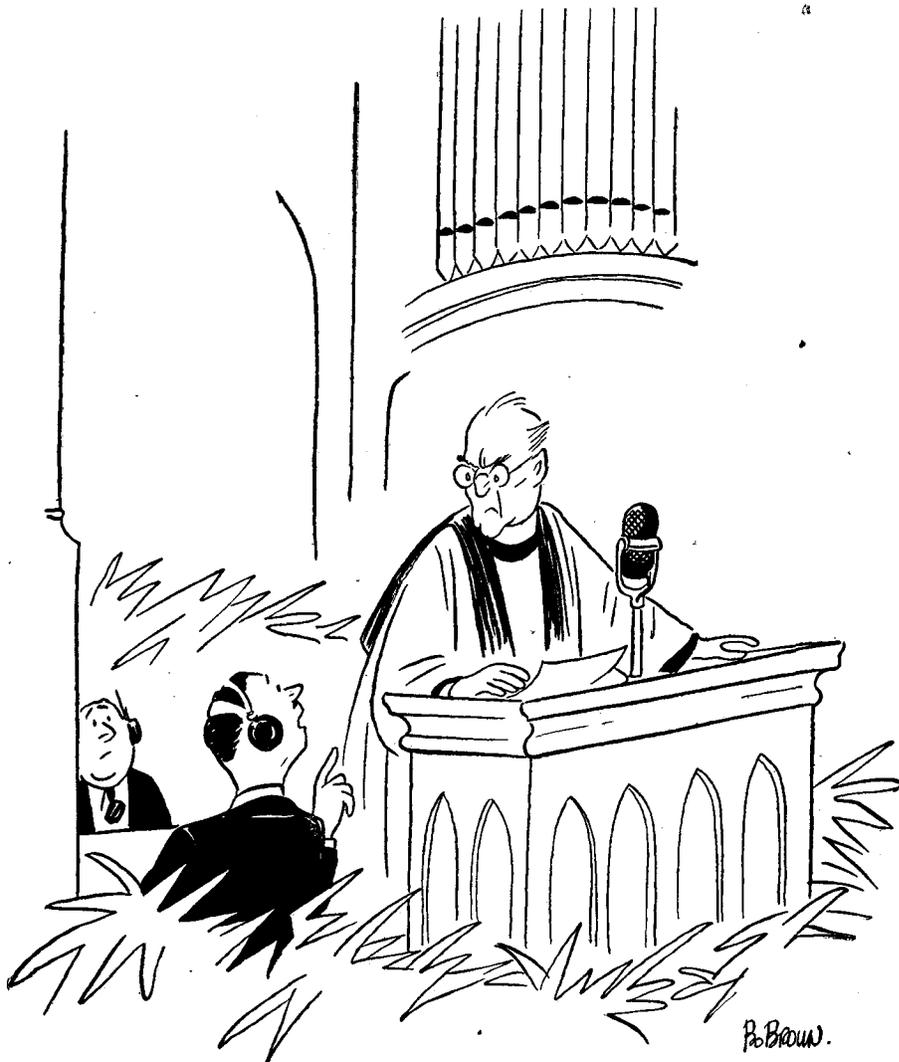
under observation, we would serve them in the lovely shining new kitchen.

Before the end of that year, we were as fully established as if we had been there for years: stained-glass windows in the chapel, rubber runners along the hardwood, highly polished corridors, a beautiful set of parlor furniture donated by the Chinese Embassy, a cheerful, sunny community room, and each cell well equipped for study and comfort and privacy. It was my joy that I, the supernumerary, could, out of the proceeds from my writings, pay for some tiny little details: a bell for the refectory, a vase for Holy Mother's altar, an electric iron for the sewing room.

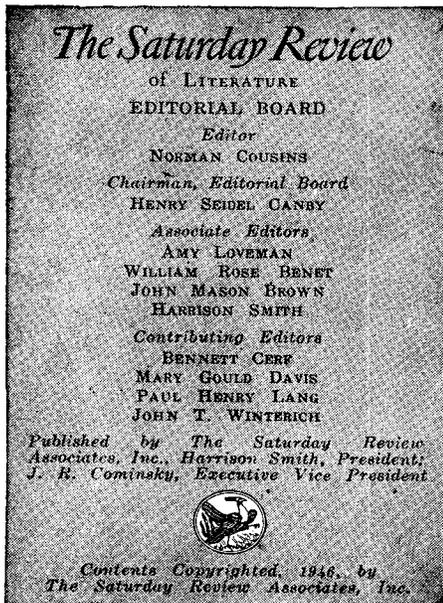
We often talked of the "old days." The superior's remark: "I believe we were happier then than we'll ever be in more comfortable circumstances" was scouted at, because all along we were as happy as we could be anyway.

But it remains true that there is a jubilant exhilaration in privations that seemingly nothing else can furnish.

SR. M. MARGUERITE, R.S.M.



"If you use that word again, doctor—you'll be off the air!"



## THE ROOT OF THE MATTER

**I**N SEPTEMBER of this year the Union of Soviet Writers, which seems to be the custodian of the right to print for Russia, expelled its president and other writers distinguished at least in Russia, for their ability. The cause was that they had forgotten that literature is "a mighty weapon for the education of the Soviet people, especially youth, and that they should therefore be guided in their work by the politics of the Soviet Union." The convicted writers had made "serious political mistakes."

There is nothing new in this attitude; no one denies that literature and journalism "make a mighty weapon for . . . education"; no one, we trust, really desires that they should both be irresponsible. The question is responsible to whom, or to what? The Athenians gave poison to Socrates because he had corrupted youth. The English courts clamped down on the brilliantly immoral Restoration drama. Increase Mather, that great Puritan of Massachusetts when Massachusetts was an ecclesiastical state, asserted that, "Sinful Toleration is an evil of exceedingly dangerous consequence." Yet in the same sermon he added, "It were better to err by *too much indulgence* towards those that have the *root of the matter* in them, than by *too much severity*."

What is "the root of the matter"? The Western world has variously described it throughout the classic and Christian ages as approved politics, sound morals, orthodox conceptions of science, or the safety, as Machiavelli would have said, of the Prince. And always and everywhere in this Western culture, some book has been written which did not square with current politics, or the Church's morals, or accepted ideas of the nature

of the world, or the will of the dictator, and yet proved to have the root of the matter in it, and powerfully survived. Furthermore, if twenty-four hundred years of experience demonstrates anything, it is this, that the most dangerous, and ineffective, guardians of literature are those who have control of the politics of the state and wish to control its education. Therefore, if the Politbureau intends to limit literary production in Russia to those "who stand on a platform of Soviet power and participate in socialist construction," they condemn Russian literature to the role of inspired propaganda, inspired only by them. We shall not have to bother about Russian literature as literature, for there will be no imagination let loose in the Soviets. It is quite incredible that the root of the matter, except on the required textbook level, will ever conform to the orthodoxy of the status quo. It never has before; why should it now?

This leaves the American, who still has a reasonable freedom of speech, complacent, if not smug. If *Pravda* accuses our newspapers and our books and magazines of being irresponsible, all he has to reply is that, naturally, they are not responsible to the dictates of our Communist Party. That is what *Pravda* means, of course. But put the shoe on the other foot. Many of our newspapers and magazines of some of our books *are* irresponsible. They shamelessly misstate the truth, especially the newspapers. They vulgarize their appeal to the people, if vulgarizing seems to be profitable. Some of our successful writers are dirty for the sake of being dirty, which is very different from being frank for the sake of truth. They are cheaply cynical at a time when cynicism, like Mather's Tolerance, can have exceedingly dangerous consequence. They are certainly not responsible to any

known ideals of conduct which can be drawn from our long cultural experience; certainly not to any known religion; certainly not to any conceivable benefits to education or morality by any definition of the words, unless "reader interest" with its accompanying advertising be regarded as an end justifying any means. This is not a charge against American literature or American journalism; it is a charge against some American literature and more American journalism—too serious to allow us smugness and complacency. *Pravda* has hit the nail on the head, but not of course the nail *Pravda* aimed at.

It is to be hoped that we have learned from the experience of the last two centuries particularly, that censorship gets nowhere with this problem. The trouble with censorship is always the censors, and the powers behind them. If umpires are always unpopular, censors, beyond the most elementary items of law enforcement, with the long experience of the common law behind them, always go wrong, because they have to apply their fallible ideas of right and wrong to a culture steadily changing. It is not a question of good or bad, but of good or bad literature, and no constituted authority can judge finally of that any more than the brake knows where the wheel is going. Readers—it would seem to be up to you—whether you read with your heads and your hearts, or with your glands and your acid indigestions. The figure of speech is not very scientific, but it is easy enough to understand. Proprietors, publishers, critics—it would seem to be up to you, whether you make money responsibly, and you have demonstrated your ability to do that—or irresponsibly. Responsible to what? Let your intelligence, and your conscience, decide. Not either, but both. One is not to be trusted without the other. H. S. C.

## Theory

By Mae Winkler Goodman

**H**ERE is no perspective: we can only trace  
This moment, unrelated, out of space,

Ourselves but acting out a pantomime  
Upon no stage, within no scene, no time.

Historians, of course, will pen conclusions  
Based upon their usual delusions,

Effect and cause, some theory to reduce  
Our actions into simple ones and twos,

While still the hour, by its pure suspension  
Defeats all theory, draws a new dimension!