

The AMERICAN

A LITERARY

Vol. I. No. 2. ★

DECEMBER

The AMERICAN SPECTATOR
A LITERARY NEWSPAPER

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The AMERICAN SPECTATOR

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EDITORIAL

Now that we are equipped with every conceivable device for the promotion of international peace, international good will is fast disappearing. Never before have the nations of the world been torn by so many reciprocal hates, fears and rivalries. There is now so much international understanding that civilized men must sigh for the good old days when international ignorance was bliss, when communications were slow, uncertain and

All of these marvels, each in a thousand different ways, contribute directly to the defeat of the ideal of an intelligently harmonious world. Does anybody believe, for example, that the movies have raised the prestige of America in the eyes of the millions abroad who are more familiar with Hollywood stars than a minority of intelligent foreigners once was with New England literature? When Henry Adams was in London, was he bored by Englishmen who complained that the talkies were destroying the English language? More people in England are interested in American phonograph records of the jazz variety than ever heard of Bryce's "American Commonwealth." Which of the two is preferable as an instrument of international understanding? American broadcasting programs are so dreadful that Canada has already taken steps to escape. But think of the ill-omened day when an entire peace-loving world will tune in on Amos 'n' Andy and their political equivalents.

comet afforded an excellent opportunity. The New York Symphony caused a sensation that Gershwin, at the behest of the encouragement of Dr. Damrosch, gave a jazz piano concerto which established once and for all the status of a native genius and incited a revolution on his patron who, as a result of the service, was then badly injured. It worked like a charm. Continued in the New Yorker the matter was treated with the same seriousness. Full of the same significant figure in American music past or present, Gershwin's death. Thence he returned with a new work. The merger of the two orchestras brought its première without incident. This

PROSE OF A PALLBEARER

by BRANCH CABELL

It is my foible, one among many, to be a devotee of the niceties, of the overtones and of the precisions of very often rewritten and suitably colored prose. I believe it well for an author to make sport with rhetorical devices, to play with vowel sounds and scansion, to build refrains, to dispose his cadences, to contrast the length of his clauses, to turn amorously to a run of liquids—to carve, as it were, his verbal cherry-stones under a magnifying glass of repeated re-inspection,—and to practise by the score yet other allied legerdemains: all quite seriously. It is but a series of microscopic parlor games, perhaps: but it will entertain him. It will lull him into the pleasure-giving illusion that the writing of prose may be an art—terse, magical, complex, fiery-hearted and gaudy, at need, with the naïveté of a June sunset—an art wherein, by-and-by, toward his later nineties, he may attain competence.

Such is my foible, or, if you so prefer, my creed. And on account of it, my main objection to all our current authors (as well as to their predecessors in this great republic) is that they do not try to write prose commensurate with the resources of the English language; nor do they harbor, to all appearances, the belief that prose requires any special "writing." Prose, as an art, does not really exist to the consciousness of our literati. It is an art in which no American has yet excelled; and as fondly to-day as aforesaid, our best-thought-of writers have been abetted in their clumsy and drab delinquencies by our best-thought-of reviewers.

Yet in the main, you may observe, reviewers do not much bother about style. At most, they will comment, in passing, on the excellent prose style of some author who has none. It is what the writer "has to say" which counts: and provided that what he says is "significant" or "vital" or "daring" or "of grave importance"—and, in short, is "timely"—then his book has the needed essentials, for everything except, of course, permanence.

For under the touch of time the "timely" proves always to be ephemeral. Twice, in preparing prefaces for the re-issue of a book I had written some while earlier, I have had occasion to explore the back files of the *Publisher's Weekly*: and (barring, to be sure, one's own books) I can think of no more dreadful, and yet salutary, reading for anybody who "writes." One by one they took form again, the just cloudily remembered auctorial great of yester-year. Here were Brander Matthews, John Fox, Winston Churchill, Gene Stratton Porter, Henry Van Dyke, Thomas Dixon, Mary E. Wilkins, Mary Johnston, Mary MacLane, Hergesheimer, Cabell and Harold Bell Wright, Upton Sinclair, Booth Tarkington, Henry Sydnor Harrison, David Graham Phillips, Richard Harding Davis and Meredith E. Nicholson: one had plain proof here that all these semi-fabulous persons once did actually exist.

Since each was American-born, they reached not ever to the magnitude of Hall Caine, or of Mrs. Humphry Ward, or of Michael Arlen, in the eyes of Americans, one noticed: but, even so, they had all been gravely received, at this time or the other time, as ponderable figures in our literature; and their publishers' advertising matter quoted, from the reviewers of that far-off day, encomia and prophesyings which now appeared as unbalanced

and incredible and droll and dusty (and yet pathetic, too) as does the Gettysburg Address or the Apostles' Creed.

Each one of these writers, I inferred from their grim relics, was a "timely" figure. Each in his or her little hour, no doubt, wrote as to some topic or another topic in which the book-buyers of that transient hour happened to be interested. So each was heard (I meditated) because of his or her "timely" theme; each was hymned by the reviewers and by the women's clubs and by the advertisements now forever ensepulchered in the back files of the *Publisher's Weekly*; and each by-and-by was to all practical intents forgotten, when the reading public turned what might without uncustomary exaggeration be called its mind to yet other topics.

I became quite sentimental over the back files of the *Publisher's Weekly*. Who now remembers just what questions of the day these mighty dead discoursed or viewed with alarm? All these, it is plain, enchanted the judicious briefly: but with what unrecoverable cantraps, what ancient runes? Spoke they of race suicide or of votes for women, of white slavery or of the white man's burden, or of that imperilled younger generation which rode on bicycles? What songs, in brief, did these shadowy Sirens sing? and what good name had each hero, when he lived, among club women, fondly admired upon rostra, between the Madam Chairman and an ice-water pitcher? Very few persons know nowadays and, quite certainly, nobody living cares. When Mizraim is become mummy he is at worst assured of a hospitable reception in one or another museum; but for the discrowned prince of literature there is no asylum save the pulping-mill.

Each one of these once popular writers, I suspect, was tainted with moral earnestness. Sincerity—"that youthful virtue," as Samuel Butler has called it—is an ill which few Americans escape in private life; and yet, incalculably, does our race demand also in its better-thought-of reading-matter that tutorial sort of dullness which voices the most subtle emotions and the most profound thoughts of morons. The fact is sad; it seems inexplicable: but it remains undeniable. So each of these aforenamed popular writers, I have no doubt, gravely addressed himself to grave problems, and had, as the phrase runs, "something to say." Each said (I imagine) his little something about "timely" matters, and duly heard his grave and apropos saying applauded; and then of course, so soon as the especial problem concerned was settled or let slide, his saying became unrelated to reality. Each commented (I daresay) upon conditions which no longer exist; and to the intrepid explorer of their time-yellowed pages it must now seem as though these writers were talking gravely about dragons as social perils or were at pains to expose the hypocrisy of the unicorn.

I do not, I confess, know what these once "timely" persons did write about. I have not the hardihood to be myself that aforementioned explorer. For I find that I instinctively (or, at the last pinch, with plain panic terror) avoid the writer who has "something to say." He always says it so raucously, and his saying is always so very, very familiar. His admirers, happy in that their enthusiasms are not restricted by any rudiments of education, I leave free to marvel over their idol's originality: but I leave too the latter half of his book unread. I prefer other trivia, because of that foible to which I confessed at outset.

I prefer Thackeray elegiac over the fact that all dolls are stuffed with sawdust; I prefer Sir Thomas Browne's amplification of one single truism, that Queen Anne is dead, into the gorgeous last chapter of "Urn Burial"; and I very much prefer Pater's rhapsody over La Gioconda, wherein the pomps of language triumph decisively over the absence of any particular meaning. It is my avocation to delight in the so curiously unappreciated prose of Shakespeare and the prose of Congreve, of De Quincey and of Stevenson, of Swinburne (howsoever indefensible I may here feel to be my pleasure), of Arthur Machen and of Lord Dunsany and of Max Beerbohm; and of yet many other un-American writers who have noticed that human language is an instrument far more impressive than is the human intelligence, and so have ambitiously devoted themselves to the nobler medium. I prefer, in brief, a writer who knows how to write, on the same principle that I prefer a cook who knows how to cook, or a chauffeur who can drive a car; and I await with considerable impatience the time when just one American, somewhere, may learn how to write with competence.