

## Literature as a dead duck.

One of the most pleasant recollections I have of my recent trip to Europe is the number and variety of good books which were everywhere in evidence. What a relief it was to be looking again at paper-backed books whose titles, authors', and publishers' names alone combine to make such attractive, seductive cover designs. Is there anything more dull, monotonous, and destructive to the appetite than the typical American hard-cover book whose paper jacket screams and shrieks to capture attention? Facing me, as I write, are the backs of some thousand or more books which form my meager library. The foreign editions stand out with the same downright integrity, simplicity, and reality which distinguish the man of Europe from the American in my eyes. For, in the realm of book-making as in the realm of politics or any other realm, each nation reveals its own peculiar traits. Opening a Swedish book, for example, you will always find excellent white paper and clean, clear, attractive type enhanced by the diacritical marks employed in Swedish script. One can never mistake an Italian book for a German book, or vice versa. As for de luxe editions, the foreign ones are as superior to the American variety as anything "de luxe" can be. It is the same sort of difference one finds between the best American cooking and the best French, or between a suite of rooms at the Claridge or the Crillon and a suite in any expensive hotel in Manhattan (where there seem to be nothing but expensive hotels).

Every time I receive a copy of the *Guilde du Livre's* monthly bulletin my heart jumps with joy. Even if I have not the time to read every article, the mere leafing through the bulletin warms me and exhilarates me in a way that nothing from the American publishing world possibly can. I could offer many reasons for my reactions but the chief one, I believe, is that anything which a European writes about books or authors revives in me that most wonderful feeling of inexhaustibility. With us the subject of literature seems to have been worn threadbare ages ago. I have the impression that there is no genuine, vital, continuous interest in books or their makers. All I am aware of is a compensatory activity which resembles the feverishness of drunken grave-diggers. The few who spend their time fanning the flame, who work laboriously to dig up new facts, figures, or whatever may have a sensational appeal, do not impress me as book-loves; they do not write from a superabundant wealth of experience or association with books; they are not overflowing with rich memories, bizarre encounters, shattering first-hand discoveries; they are not making symphonic parallels and analogies with other books, other authors, other languages, other times. One seldom feels that any of these gents has ever been on intimate terms with a great author, or

even a distinguished author. This does not deter him, however, from writing about his subject as if he were an all-seeing eye. In my prejudiced opinion this kind of writing reeks of embalming fluid, or, worse, of the garbage can. The most sickening stench exhales from the accredited scholars, the erudite termites who hollow their way through books until there is nothing left but the shreds of literature and the husks of what once were men.

No matter where I went on the Continent, no matter how small the town, I was forever planting myself before a bookshop window, scanning the titles of new and old publications with feverish interest. In America I have only to glance at a window out of the corner of my eye and I am certain that there is nothing on the shelves of that shop which can possibly make appeal to me. It is as if all the books, all the magazines, everything printable (including the dictionaries and encyclopedias) were written by the same standardized mind, written by some incredible monster of unilateral taste and sclerotic imagination whose name might well be John Doe or Aloysius Smith. No matter what the subject matter--science, fiction, biography, philosophy--all seems to merge into a hazy, vacuous glue of words which falls apart merely by looking at it. The "binder" is in the hard covers, not in the thought or language employed.

No doubt I exaggerate. I know as well as the cultured European that some good books have come out of America in the last fifty or a hundred years. I insist, nevertheless, that there is a huge core of truth in this wholesale condemnation of our literature. One has only to narrow down the focus to the last ten years, or the last five years; one has only to compare our output with that of Continental authors, to perceive that I am not talking wildly. The stark, grave fact is that we have made our people literate and in doing so we have made it almost impossible for our creative writers to get an audience. The men most active in making books accessible to the general public today have only a supreme contempt for literature. They are trying to pretend that the man who has read little or nothing before--an extraordinary percentage of our population, by the way--will, by reading the trash purveyed through pocket-book editions, begin to acquire a taste for real literature. This is an outrageous lie. One acquires a taste for good literature by reading good literature, not by starting with the comic paper or the crossword puzzle. In pioneer days our children were at least made acquainted with the language of the Bible; if they suffered from a restricted reading diet their minds were certainly not vitiated by the language of the few volumes at their disposal. Today one shudders when he sees what meat his youngsters feed on. One is even more shocked to observe what our men in uniform devour in their leisure moments. But perhaps heroes are able to subsist on any diet!

Nowadays, in addition to the usual litter of empty cartons, empty bottles, empty tin cans which dot the fringes of our highways, one also finds the discarded magazines, pocket books and "comics" which make up the fodder of our benighted reading public. Read like lightning, digested like sawdust, vomited out like refuse, this machine-made literary caca takes its place with all the other worthless bric-a-brac of our comfort-loving citizens in whose minds struggle and denial are the great moral bugaboos. Thus, after all the hullabaloo, everything we so efficiently, uniformly, and expensively manufacture boils down to the same ugly caca which everyone recognizes everywhere in the world.

Here is an illuminating fact which I gleaned from the editor of a pocket-book firm recently. It is in line with what I have just pointed out. Why bother any more with bookkeeping? Why try to remainder unsold copies of an edition? Why dicker with rag or junk dealers? The simplest, easiest, least expensive procedure to adopt with unsold pocket books is to burn them. How very much like the tactics of the War Department this sounds! This is the American idea of efficiency and progress. The European, ever horrified, calls it waste. In the last analysis it is sheer lack of respect for creator and created, pure sacrilege, pure destructiveness. When this policy becomes widespread, as it undoubtedly will, literature will be finished, and with it books and authors. As it is, we have at present a flourishing ambiguous business called the publishing business, which has nothing to do with literature, nothing to do with creative spirits.

And there is no sign of revolt! To upset the trend it would be necessary to return to some imaginary medieval condition whereby we re-established writers' guilds, printers' and booksellers' guilds and created and produced once again for the few, not the many. It would have to be done, moreover, for love and without hope of reward, without hope even of being understood.

To me it seems absolutely evident that we are at the end of our rope. Only a miracle can stem the tide, and if a miracle does occur it will necessarily assume a shape and direction no one at present can foresee. I am one of those who believe in miracles for the simple reason that all my life I have been witness to them. The one infallible thing I have observed about miracles is that they happen only when all is seemingly lost. Is it startling to hear that we are very close to this extremity? Is it so difficult to believe that America, at the peak of its power, is so dangerously near the end? Think! Our chief and foremost writers, the men whose works foreign editors have chosen for translation and whom the foreign critics have praised as being representative of America, these men almost without exception have portrayed in diverse ways the

unbelievable plight of the common man in America. And who is this common man, what sort of specimen is he?

Well, outwardly at least, this common man seemed originally to have a golden opportunity for development and fulfilment, for becoming one day the "democratic" man whom Whitman extolled. Look at him today! Seen through the eyes of our leading writers he now appears to be the most pathetic, abject, forlorn creature imaginable. It is even difficult to write about him tragically since drama is one of the things in his life which is nonexistent. He has become an object, not a subject. As for the new mass production pulp literature wherein he is treated as a digit in machine-made formulas, here he has neither face nor name but is shuffled about like a flesh-and-blood robot, like the victim of a soulless society, on an electronic chessboard operated by a dummy hidden in the cells of a publisher's diseased brain. Busily engaged in saving the world from destruction, as he is repeatedly told by his masters, this man of the masses, this pawn of the mindmachine, calmly surrenders all identity. He has not only been sold out, he has also vacated the premises. Like the science-fiction writers who in imagination have already departed this earth, he too wanders from planet to planet, a malefic voyager amidst malefic planets. He wanders as a sleepwalker, knowing nothing of urge, volition, or choice. He has abandoned all discrimination. Become absolutely passive, he is ready and willing to accept any condition of life that may be imposed upon him. His only free field of operation is the world of crime, where delusion makes its last stand.

If one has the courage to believe in signs and portents then the forecast for the morrow is doom. In the interval, which we may as well regard as eternity, I for one shall keep my ears cocked to catch the last strains of those delicious, seemingly outmoded melodies which the men of Europe pluck from their heartstrings.

Perhaps I have a morbid interest in the elegant cemeteries which house the glamorous culture of Europe. Perhaps I am not a man of my time. Perhaps I am only at ease with those quixotic Europeans who persist in regarding themselves as individuals, who speak meaningfully of destiny, purpose, fulfilment, and who see life as tragic and therefore sublime. Perhaps I am one of the Stone Age men who look upon books as evidence of things unseen, of powers undenominated, who still measure time by moments of shock and discovery, who doubt only in order to attain certitude. Perhaps I am of an ancient order of unknown mages and magicians silly enough to believe that creative spirits, writers among them, are not as other men but moved and directed by powers above them, powers unknown to them, and (knowing this) are therefore loyal and obedient, filled with love and with reverence.

I do not know what it is that unites me with the men of Europe unless it be the feeling that a sense of humanity is in itself sufficient to create the indissoluble pact--between man and man and man and God. When literature becomes the play of unthinking pawns there is no longer subject or object, author or creation. And if this be so, then we must all be returned to the button-molder and life itself be recreated. I have seen the wild duck become a dead duck and the dead duck a Donald Duck. I prefer--"doubt's duck with the vermilion lips."