

WRONGING THE MUSES

By J. Frazier Vance

IT is, perhaps, reactionary to insist that the nine muses of tradition are sufficient for present day civilization. In this age of representative government many will insist that the membership of that body should be determined as is the membership of our Congress: one muse for each block of so many thousands of population. This arrangement would certainly make it easier for the muses. How they must have to scurry about nowadays! It might even be practicable to rearrange the whole system of liberal arts on the twentieth century cafeteria pattern. This would be a great convenience for the musician or painter or author. One can fancy a poet entering an Inspiration Automat and dropping his nickel in the sonnet slot. That sounds, as I write it, like a constructive suggestion. I must develop it when I have more leisure.

At the moment, it seems most important that I register protest against an unprincipled practice now frequently resorted to by so called artists in all the media of expression, and to call particular attention to the abuses of writers.

In general, this practice may be compared to the old "rotten borough" system in English politics. Just as large numbers of people were unrepresented in Parliament while nonexistent townships had a vote, so now vast regions of art must remain substantially inarticulate while their logical advocates plump for individuals who represent no art whatever and have no honest claim to membership in the council of muses. It is in this way that

Moronia has won to a place beside Calliope, and with her loud, insistent chatter has drowned out much that the world would have liked to hear.

To be explicit:

There is much to be said in support of the theory that all varieties of art find their truest expression in very childish manifestations; that the mature artist is subject to restraints and inhibitions that do not stifle the child. This has been demonstrated so frequently and so conclusively that it is hardly open to question any longer.

True poetry is more than sound. It is feeling, as well, and it has, too, a generous strain of song within it, inherent. It is to be witnessed in its purest form in the group games of childhood and in the simple dances of the primitive and unsophisticated, where the movements of the dancers are accompanied by rhythmic intonations.

True story telling (which is the essence of literature) is also a very simple, unlettered recital. An imaginative child can enthrall an adult audience as the most gifted writer cannot. Perhaps the choicest gems of "literature" have never been transcribed. They may be incongruous, absurd, bawdy even, but they are adequate, accurate, artistic, as related by the garrulous child.

I have a niece, for example, who at five could entertain a room full of relatives for hours at a time with plausible tales of her imagined domestic adventures: the unruly children — seven,

all named, she possessed — one of whom was a Catholic; the hard working father who made automobiles (a profession entirely foreign to our family); the pestiferous neighbors who were always coming a-borrowing; above all, her unhappily married daughter — about these she wove the most astounding tales, flawless in plot, abounding alike in tragedy and humor. The concerns of school, at eight, have rendered her inarticulate. She is as reluctant now to reveal the workings of her imagination to a favorite uncle as she was formerly in the presence of strangers. The avalanche of maxims and truisms that descends upon the child in school paralyzes the imagination with surprise. My niece, at present, is more concerned with veracity than with truth, with order than with beauty. It may be that she has told her last story — that the inhibitions of realized existence will stifle expression as she grows older and becomes accustomed to the terrifying axioms of knowledge. But there remains at least one fictional achievement of the first water in her explanation, untranscribed, of the “beautiful ladies in their nighties” parading in the “Aurora” above her grandfather’s fireplace.

Acknowledging the superiority of the juvenile story teller, however, and the charm of naïveté that is unassumed, it does not follow that imitations are, or even can be, good. Personally, when an adult arrogates baby talk, it is necessary that I exert the limit of self restraint to keep from launching some unmistakable evidence of disapproval in his direction. The language of childhood is not a dialect. It is a serious attempt on the part of the child to talk the language of the grown up, and the child recognizes the difference.

I am told that at two I was unable

to say “applesauce”. A cousin, one year my senior, was similarly handicapped but much grieved at my ineptness. One evening, after I had demanded a second service of that dish, he remarked in a disappointed tone:

“‘Ittle baby [such he regarded me] can’t say ‘happerhock’, him say ‘tappy tot’.”

The dialogue of childhood is, I repeat, an honest endeavor to speak the language of the grown up, and spurious or inadequate approximations of childhood’s own dialect are easily detected. So, children alone can produce the art of childhood — a lead quarter is not more easily detected than a counterfeit juvenile production.

The reasons for this are obvious, I think, to the least contemplative person. Unexplained, the world is unexceptionably marvelous. Commonplaces are full of romance and mystery — everything is legitimate story material.

Thus it is that we have our treasures of legend and folklore. They are the inheritance of a maturing world from its own childhood. What later fables have we that approach the genuine? Cabell, Swift, Rabelais — to name only the universally known — are burdened with purpose. Their greatness, their enduring qualities, are attributable to the measure of success with which the authors have met in approaching the childish point of view. Their weaknesses lie in the allegory and the satire, the one unconvincing to a cynical world, the other transitory in large measure.

Writers who are able to approach the zenith recognize and acknowledge their shortcomings — remain great writers. It is the dilettanti, producer and consumer, who are to blame for the present sad state of letters, and whom I would condemn in this paper.

Keith Preston once declared:

Among our literary scenes,
Saddest this sight to me,
The graves of little magazines
That died to make verse free.

The reason why this quatrain is lacking in lugubrious sound and feeling is that Keith Preston knows as well as anyone that it is dilettantism that kills the little magazines and not free verse. True poetry is as apt to assume a free form as not, and it is safe to say that no piece of real free verse ever did damage to a magazine.

However, the little magazines of Keith Preston's lament are too often the organs of the "rotten borough" system of our contemporary fine arts. Too frequently some "liberal" finds a ready market for his slipshod imitations of elemental literature. The masterpieces defying restraint are consumed in quantity and accorded much acclaim by persons who should know better. The fault is that the reader is as slipshod as the writer. The one is too lazy to write better, the other too lazy to read with discernment. The result is a scourge of dilettantitis.

That readers should know better than to accept the imitation is demonstrated by the incident which gave rise to this paper.

Some months ago one of the better known little magazines was in its death throes. It had been struggling into print month after month with lifeless, colorless, formless attempts at realism. Its one saving grace was that it was not always serious. When it was admittedly talking tongue-in-cheek, it was rich; when it became earnest it was woefully ridiculous.

Then the miracle happened. A bona fide elemental author appeared on the horizon, and "An Awful Storming Fire, or Her and I on a Journey to the Secret of the Sun" lent unusual

distinction to its pages. From all quarters, the editorial chambers were showered with commendations. Everyone wanted to know the identity of Charles L. Durboraw, the author.

"An Awful Storming Fire" was called to my attention by several of the intelligentsia. It was a masterpiece, said they; and even I, who must confess to stolid, almost reactionary tastes, agreed. It was vital, living, powerful—the work of genius. Again I nodded. Unmistakably it was the work of a highly educated, widely read master of writing and of the language who was able to project himself into the personality of an unlettered, earthy, and imaginative being. Under what bushel had this bright light so long been hid? Perhaps it was one of our contemporary Shakespeares writing under an assumed name and attaining for the first time his full stature. Invariably these recommendations came from persons who knew more about such things than I, and I assented in this last claim as well. There was about the work a sincerity or authenticity, a simplicity that put it far out in front of other "elemental" and "kaleidoscopic" fiction. "One would think it was being told by just such a person as it is being told about", said the wise ones. The point is that they did not really think so.

The "Awful Storming Fire" was applied too late to the little magazine. It did not kindle, was not even warmed. It died, not unwept, and has not experienced resurrection.

I have made the acquaintance of Charles L. Durboraw, by mail. I have not his permission to hold him up as an uncouth giant of realism, but I would like to use him to demonstrate my thesis that the stories styled by our most studious critics as "elemen-

tal", "rugged", "earthy", are best told by authors who write thus in their own vernacular. I would not imply that these authors are juvenile or childish. I only assert that the "educated" man, the erudite, polished master of style and language, in attaining the qualifications of that station loses his ability to write in the manner he now so frequently attempts. Charles L. Durboraw, the Chicago house painter, is perhaps the master of them all.

He is not ignorant, he is not inexperienced in the "vital things of life".

His most recent letter read:

... As to some biographical material concerning myself will say I was born on a farm in Washington County Maryland. Janu 5th 1879. And went overland to Tacoma Wash with my parents in 1880. and since then my life has been a most wonderful and interesting one. full of adventure. I have been across the continent from the Coast to the eastern Citys, 9 different times, I have worked at various occupations., I have seen the ice and snow in Alaska. I have been to Europe two different times. London. Liverpool. and Glasgow. I have rambled around and mingled with people in some of the lowest of dives and also been in touch with high society. I have had lots of accidents and sicknesses. There is a whole lot more about me and from what I have said so far will I think give you a sort of idea about myself. I have other stories written and can write more . . .

He sent me manuscripts of some half dozen of his stories in response to my request, showing that "An Awful Storming Fire" was not a mere flash in the pan. I include one of the shorter ones which, while it may fall a little short of "An Awful Storming Fire", well supports my contention:

A PAIR OF SOCKS

In a store of a small town way out west, there was displayed through a dirty, dusty window, along with a whole lot of other selling stuff, several big piles of various kinds of socks.

And so, early on time one morning there

arrived the fast right-of-way merchandise freight No. 54, and its crew, which stops, and the conductor goes to the station for his orders while two brakemen, one on each side of the train, make a hurried inspection to see that all is in order.

The head brakeman finds a hobo underneath a box car. He was ordered out and told he could not ride this train.

We will call him "Bill in tatters". He looks around as if lost, then starts on a stroll, sizes up the town and looks at the sights. He starts to get hungry, as it is common for his way and class.

Strolling along he works himself up near to a house, looks and rubbers around hunting for the back door. Opening a gate he goes in and up to a partly opened door, which saved his skinny, boney finger the work of a rap. He sees a young mother startled from amusing her child.

"Good morning, madam", he says and asks her for a bite to eat. She answers "Yes" and Bill was invited in and told to sit down. The mother takes her baby and places it safe in a high chair. A little nervous and fretful she was in getting around.

Forcing the stove to a heat she placed the coffee pot on. Then ground a handful of coffee and dropped in. To the pantry she went and from off the shelves got sugar, milk, bread, butter, jam and some pickles. Our traveler, hungry Bill, seen the sight and shivered in his chair. From a drawer under the table a big butcher knife she got, then cut from the bread ten big slices, the whole loaf. A big soup plate she made full of strawberry jam. Next she got the biggest measuring cup in the house and filled the same with steaming coffee nearly to the brim. The good soul then turned around and spoke to Bill. "Please, my dear sir, come and sit up to the table. There is a meal for you, 'tis the best I can do." "Yes, madam, I indeed thank you" spoke traveling Bill.

He arose very jerky and nervous, his crumbled hat in his hand. Then he sits down at the table and shivers again. He threw his dirty hat on the floor and crossed his weary feet, looked around at the meal and then his hand shot at the bread and he laid butter and jam on it nearly an inch thick. He ate all the bread and also the jam and one big pickle. The big cup of coffee he saved until last to make his voice clear.

Then he picks up his hat with difficulty, gets up and steps to the door. Turning around he said, "I thank you, madam, for your help to me. I once had a home, plenty and most all that I wanted. When I was a little kid I remember it very well this truth. Beggars and tramps as named and called, but not all, many times would come

to our back door for a bite to eat. I now bid you a good day and a holy blessing for your soul."

The young mother closes the door and wipes her weeping eyes dry. Then she cleans up the crumbs and gets things in neat trim. She then takes her crying child in her lap and nurses it to sleep.

Feeling better and rather frisky, Bill loafs and strays around town. He gets down to the little depot and asks about trains. Was told there would be a fast freight out, east bound, at ten P.M. He then fumbled around and found a pile of rusty rails. Used to hard knocks, he lays down on them, falls asleep and sleeps on.

Suddenly he wakes up by the rumblings of a special that speeds by. Gets up, looks around, stretches himself, and feels hungry again. He starts up town and on the way meets a natty, dudey stranger. Bill asks him for a match and is given more than a dozen. The stranger asks Bill questions about the little town. Bill says, "I dont know anything around here as I am a stranger too, and am killing time in waiting for a freight out tonight, east bound."

Bill, then, from habit, told the stranger a very hard luck tale and asked him for the price of a square meal and some smokes. Bill thanked the stranger for a bright new dollar, and on a stroll up town, still wandering along lonely down the main street, he stops in front of the little town store. Then for twenty long minutes he looked through the dusty window. He turns around and enters the store and asks for a pair of socks, pays a quarter for them; then bought tobacco and hurried out. Strolling around he again gets down to the railroad tracks. He sits down on the pile of rusty rails and removes his shoes, then looks at his new socks, feels 'em, smells 'em and puts 'em on.

He then got up and amused himself in dancing a hobo jig. Then he sits down, soon lays down and soon goes to sleep. Suddenly from his rusty flop, he hears the

whistle of the night freight. Along through the night comes the train and stops for its orders. Bill, like a ghost, frisks around and finds a place to ride out. He rides the train all through the long, dark, cloudy night.

About dawn he arrives in a big town hungry, and starts begging again. That day he gets pinched and the hard judge said thirty days.

Discharged from doing time, wandering, on out of town he went. He counted many telegraph poles to bridges and many ties for ten bad miles. He came to a stream from a spring of cool, clear, running water. Got down on his knees, then his stomach and drank like a beast. Then he rolls over on his side, braces himself and sits up.

He takes off his shoes, and then his socks and smells 'em. With a sock in each hand he leaned over nearly falling into the stream. Then he dipped them into the clear, running water on a summer day.

He dipped and dipped and dipped until he got them soaking wet. Then he rubbed and rubbed and rubbed till they started to wash. He washed and washed and washed them suddenly into mushy fiber. So tired, weak and hungry was Bill it stopped his thoughts.

As the sun went down he fell over dead, partly into the running water.

Fate in nature was kind in babtizing his weary, earthly end.

The moral is obvious.

The muses talk in all languages. It is unnecessary for the "polished stylist" to shove an unkempt streetwalker into the council of nine. "Elemental stuff" is "old stuff" to Calliope and Melpomene and Thalia, and what of it there is to tell they will whisper to people who will understand.

SHAKESPEARE'S CHILDHOOD

Foreword by Hector Bolitho

When I was in Australia some years ago, I found Shakespearean interest so keen that there was a permanent company of players touring the country all the time. They have given four thousand consecutive performances of the plays; a world's record. This is all the more wonderful when you remember that these countries of the antipodes were delivered from cannibalism within the last hundred years. Also, I found two interesting Shakespearean associations: one a portrait of Shakespeare which the owner claimed to be by Jansen, the famous portrait painter of that time; and the other, the following statement by a lady who claimed to be the direct descendant of Jenkins, Shakespeare's schoolmaster. This interesting and amusing record was given to me by Allan Wilkie, who was the founder of "The Shakespearean Quarterly" and also the enthusiast responsible for the permanent company of Shakespearean players. It is foolish and almost impossible to vouch for such documents. One can only present them with the assurance that to the best of one's knowledge, there is nothing of the literary fake about them. Shakespearean study is not going to be deeply aided by this limelight thrown on his schooldays, but any facts or theories are interesting and worthy of print when they surround so great a name. This then is my excuse for being the means of introducing this story to the already mighty deluge of Shakespeareana. — H. B.

WILLIAM SHAKSPEAR was born in Henley Street Stratford-on-Avon, and he was a healthy, lively child, and was described by the old wives as being as "full of mischief as an egg was full of meat". He was very quick to learn any children's games, but when he was sent to Grammar School he was one of the dullest ones there. The Head Master Rev. Thomas Jenkins, was sent down from London with a royal commission to take charge of school, and being a highly educated and gifted scholar, in those times received the highest salary outside London. As the child was too fond of looking at everything and everybody but his horn-book the teacher took charge of him, and himself, taught him beside his desk, until he knew enough to join his class. It has been well known to us that he was as dull at first as he was quick later on and he needed much patience and forbearance at first. Later on his father wished him to be taught the Protestant religion as his mothers family were

Catholic and Mr. Jenkins undertook to do so and formed a class which Willie joined and afterwards became a good Sunday scholar. He used to sit under the trees in garden for his lesson and marked his texts with sprigs of rosemary between leaves. Later on he taught a form himself for some time and being so clever had loan of books from the Headmaster to continue his studies as there were no books in Stratford at that time and only those who travelled and could read a little carried them down.

The child became a quiet industrious lad, but when about twelve years old Queen Elizabeth came to Kenilworth Castle, passing through Stratford where she was entertained. It was I think on this occasion that John Shakspear offended Sir Thomas Lucy by walking before him as an older Knight's privilege. The name of Shakspear was first borne by a tall man who was attached to the royal body guard and who was present during one