

The Arts in Giza

The State of Culture in Virginia

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WITH that aptness which appears always to rest within the control of malice, the influence of the Commonwealth of Virginia in American art has been likened, by a Northern commentator, to the influence of a serpent—but only, as one makes haste to add, the influence of a serpent in Iceland. Just as there were not any snakes in Iceland, so in Virginia, for decade after decade, did one find, in any arena of the polite arts, a practitioner whose output it was possible, through even the most obstinate alliance of prevarication with good will, to describe as mediocre.

So long as one remembers, it has been the fashion, in Virginia, to extenuate this prolonged barrenness of Virginia's culture with the explanation that all the more highly gifted products of England's first colony have turned, as a matter of course, toward statesmanship, or else launched forth, upon seas of upturned faces, as unparalleled orators, because of each branch of bamboozling's more large emoluments in the form of applause and income. Virginians, in brief, did not choose to excel in the arts, because the arts did not pay: such, rather more exaltedly worded, has been our excuse. Merely mercenary considerations, one is thus urged to infer, prevented General George Washington, during hard-earned hours of leisure, after having achieved his dignified quest to imbed matrimonially an heiress, from jotting down a few oratorios; or kept James Monroe from inditing (in addition to a Doctrine of which foreigners have been so uncritical as to accept both sections) an autochthonous and more genteel Iliad; or delayed Patrick Henry from quite finishing those paintings upon the superiority of which to many of the masterpieces of Jonathan Turnbull it would be time-wasting to dwell.

I, for one, lament this fashion of explaining the Mother of Presidents' inability to conceive anything more permanent than eight items in the, upon the whole, deplorable list of our Chief Executives. I regret the inevitable inference that the main objective of an intelligent Virginian must be to increase his bank-account by all means not of necessity exposed to punishment by the criminal laws of Virginia. I prefer to believe it was not the sordid nature of George Washington or of James Monroe or of Patrick Henry

which prevented any one from becoming a world-famous artist. I elect to think that the inferiority, or, to speak with justice, the non-existence, of Virginian art, for so long a while after Captain Christopher Newport had settled Jamestown and avoided making up any lies about Pocahontas, ought not to be attributed, as a glib matter of course, to the ingrained self-seeking of all native-born Virginians. I protest, rather, that among Virginians, and even in the statuesque bosoms of the more profitably celebrated Virginians, there may have lurked some remnants of magnanimity. I think, in brief, that we Virginians have been giving, to the lower world outside the Old Dominion, an incorrect excuse for our backwardness in artistic matters.

ALL these reflections are the immediate fruitage of a couple of sentences in the recent "Poe's Richmond,"* by Agnes M. Bondurant, a book which I must recommend very heartily to anyone who takes interest either in Edgar Allan Poe or in the social evolution of Virginia. With literary criticism Miss Bondurant is not concerned; but of the Richmond which Poe knew, the Richmond of the first half of the last century, her portrayal is no less complete and vigorous than it is opulent in the grotesque and gaudy.

Two sentences, I said: for Miss Bondurant has recorded, in her description of Richmond's cultural life, as it flick-



E. A. Poe left Richmond and found a career.

ered tenuously beside the James river a good hundred years ago, this friendly proviso against any reader's possible error: "It was not the planters"—that is, the landed aristocracy of Virginia—"but the professional and business men of Richmond who were responsible for the promotion of literary culture in the city. These were the people who showed enough appreciation for Dickens and Thackeray to give them pleasant receptions."

Neither of these sentences, I believe, upon mature deliberation, is intended to be devastating. I would very much like to acclaim Miss Bondurant as a virtuosa of irony, in view of that really unimprovable second sentence; yet, after reading her book, I imagine she wrote every word of this sentence without any unladylike indulgence in fiendish cacklings. She, perhaps, did not even smile.

Yet one needs point out, in the cause of historical truth, that when Charles Dickens visited Richmond he was not the target of a "pleasant reception." Instead, the professional and business men, who were responsible for the promotion of culture in the city of Richmond, arranged in his honor, at the Exchange Hotel, a *petite souper*. Mr. Dickens was privileged to meet about ninety of the leading commission merchants and tobacconists of Richmond, as well as a Judge of the Circuit Court and a State Senator, at this *petite souper*. That his books were liked by their wives and daughters, they all assured him in the most friendly manner. They themselves did not have much time for reading, it was admitted; but they looked forward, with an unanimous eagerness, to reading several of his books next summer, at the Springs, when one would have leisure for novels. That at least one patron of culture told him, beamingly, how much the speaker had enjoyed Mr. Dickens' "Last Days of Pompeii," appears certain.

Mr. Thomas Ritchie, owner and semi-retired editor of the *Richmond Enquirer*, presided over what he afterward described, in his paper, as "this elegant and *recherché* entertainment." At this *petite souper*, Mr. Ritchie commended Mr. Dickens for having passed over the great, the glaring, the magnificent, in order to bring out humble worth and unpretending merit; and for having sought the violet, in its lowly bed, so as to give its perfume to the light of day. The excursive imagination of our young but distinguished guest (Mr. Ritchie stated) had wandered over the whole surface of human nature; yet instead of investing wealth or power with additional attractions, it had seized upon humble points in the human landscape, had lighted

**POE'S RICHMOND*. By Agnes M. Bondurant. Richmond: Garrett & Massie. 1942. 264 pp. \$5.

them up with the fire of his genius, and had thus given to them that conspicuous position to which they were entitled.

Continuing in Mr. Ritchie's self-admitted task, to see to it that the circling hours might glide on, gladdening and rejoicing, until after midnight, Mr. Ritchie regretted that "we bring around our distinguished guest no boast of literary circle. We have no Washington Irving to grace the chair; we have no Bryant present to celebrate his praises in rapturous strain." Then Mr. Ritchie—in perfectly correct present-day form, but a full hundred years ago, in the March of 1842—went on to explain that this was simply because "the *forte* of the Old Dominion was to be found in the masculine production of her statesmen, her Washington, her Jefferson, and her Madison, who had never indulged in works of imagination, in the charms of romance, or in the mere beauties of the *belles lettres*."

The exact trick of it, one notes, lies in that "mere."

In this manner did the professional and business men, who were responsible for the promotion of literary culture in Richmond, honor conscientiously the large sales of Mr. Dickens' novels, at an elegant and *recherché* entertainment. They were not pleased when, later in the same year, he published his "American Notes."

YET Mr. Thomas Ritchie, alas, did not stop talking when the circling hours had glided to the midnight of 19 March 1842. Throughout all Virginia, Mr. Ritchie, under one or another alias, is still talking. For a full century, Mr. Ritchie has not ever ceased to account for Virginia's defects "in the mere beauties of the *belles lettres*," as in all other mere arts, by pointing out that the acknowledged *forte* of the Old Dominion is to produce great statesmen and unparalleled orators, even at a period when, to the captious, her current politicians and public speakers might appear undazzling.

Nor have we changed at all (I reflected, as I put aside Miss Bondurant's book) in that throughout Virginia it is still the professional and business men who have charge of our culture. When the leadership of any formal cultural enterprise falls vacant, it is forthwith entrusted, as an affair of course, to a retired or semi-retired man of business who—in our customary phrase—"has the time and money to attend to it."

I could think of no plain reason why a college, say, should not be conducted by a retired newspaper publisher—like Mr. Thomas Ritchie—or a civic symphony association by a retired banker, or a city's handsome and liberally endowed art gallery by the

retired head of a large department store. We might even be promoting culture, upon a proper mercantile basis, by having hired out an entire town to be demolished into the back-drop for a retired oil merchant's elegant and *recherché* and daily fancy-dress party, among his pensioners' painstaking parodies of the obsolete. How better, indeed, could culture be disposed of, once and for all, than by a person who had the time and money to attend to it? I, at least, could not find any quite definite flaw in the logic of this theory. But I did know, just as the world knows, that in practice this theory has not worked. We all know for how long a while the culture of Virginia, as thus comfortably conducted, has proved, in every field of art, to be sterile.

One considers, for example, with a sort of incredulous awe, the record of the College of William and Mary, as being the very oldest of Virginia's cultural institutions. Founded in 1693, this college has somehow managed, through-



John Marshall's Richmond home.

out the astounding length of 249 years, to produce, with but one possible exception, no graduate distinguished in any branch of creative art. The thing seems, not extraordinary, but miraculous. It defies all granted laws of probability that the name of at least one fairly known painter, or musician, or sculptor, or poet, or dramatist, should not adorn the long list of the thousands of persons who, during two and a half centuries, have been educated, and elaborately educated, at William and Mary. Yet even in the minor craft of romantic fiction-writing this college, until lately, could display only Thomas Jefferson—whom nowadays, of course, an ugly and indeed open tinge of anti-British sentiments disbars from polite consideration.

In brief, I believe Miss Bondurant

has touched the root of this matter: in Virginia the professional and business men have been always the custodians of our culture. The main, the official, promotion of every humane art has been entrusted, without fail, to this or the other coterie of highly estimable persons who, despite their many virtues, and for all that they had the time and money to attend it, yet happened to know very little, or else precisely nothing, about that special art which was their protégé; and so no more than Samson has art thrived in the hands of the Philistines. Now do you let me assure you that no word of these remarks is meant to asperse Philista, whose overlords I find to be a far more congenial breed than are artists, by and large; and whom I so cordially admire and respect in their own fields that I cannot but dislike to see them set up, like point-de-vice scarecrows, to supervise quite alien fields wherein—like Mr. Thomas Ritchie—they become unhumorous figures of fun.

ONE grants gratefully that of late the pre-eminence of Gath and Ascalon in Virginia has been rendered rather more hurtless by the increased ease of travel. The young with artistic impulses, I mean, have been able to leave Virginia (just as Poe left Virginia) so as to develop their talents elsewhere; and this they have done, with many gratifying results. No Virginian who remained in Virginia has ever achieved anything of recognized importance in the creative arts. Ellen Glasgow, who at first glance might appear the sole exception, has travelled far and often; nor during her youth was she the victim of any formal cultural training as dispensed by Virginian culture. Her primary education—it is an open secret—was an affair over which Ellen Glasgow herself presided, with the assistance of that delectable and wise gentlewoman whom Ellen Glasgow, in her caustic novel "Virginia," has commemorated as Miss Priscilla Batte.

I have not, in conclusion, any remedy to offer. When a state or a city organizes—in Edith Wharton's agreeable phrase—"to pursue culture in bands, as if it were highly dangerous," why, then the machinery of the resultant organization needs, it is obvious, to be handled by persons who are familiar with the chicane of all organizations. That is mere logic: and yet, just somehow, this mechanical hunting down of culture does fail to produce art. It produces instead, in large numbers, art's patron and apologist, as so very blatantly blended in the, I fear, immortal person of Mr. Thomas Ritchie.

BUY WAR BONDS AND STAMPS

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