

A LECTURE FOR DOROTHY

by BRANCH CABELL

WRITING in behalf of the two literary societies of your college, you, my dear Dorothy, have asked if, and when, and at what fee per evening, I would agree to lecture in your college auditorium, as to whatsoever topic I may elect (although you aidfully add you are certain that "a message" from me concerning Modern Trends in Literature would be of deep interest to the students, the faculty, and their friends), and you have asked also that I advise you whether "anything along this line" would be "worth my while."

To be frank with you, Dorothy, it would not be worth my while, nor your while either. I still marvel, with an aged and resigned wonder, at the quaint notion that some possible profit is to be got, by anybody concerned, from inducing the professional man of letters to lecture. You would not ask (I imagine) that same author, in just this off-hand fashion, to perform upon the college auditorium piano, before the students, the faculty, and their friends, or to adorn the auditorium walls with mural paintings. You would incline, first, to make sure of his musical gifts or of his ability to paint. Nor—and this is an analogue even more exact—nor would you address to that author an invitation to appear, upon a set evening, before the students, the faculty, and their friends, and thereupon to enliven the gathering by singing "Celeste Aïda" or "The Last Rose of Summer." The singer and the author (along with the actor, the lecturer, and the crossword-puzzle maker) do utilize a common material, in that each of them employs words; and yet, after hardly more than a half-hour's steady thinking about this matter, you will begin to divine, my dear Dorothy, that all these persons use words variously, in accord with the tenets and the limitations of perceptibly different arts.

I grant that members of a race so multifarious as to produce both men and women may be able in more than one art. It is humanly possible, I mean, for an author to "speak" passably: but the event is rare. Looking back through a long and terrible vista of auctorial lectures, I can recall one woman writer who "spoke" (upon I have no least notion what subject) with a simple and cordial virtuosity such as kept me through a contented hour's length mentally purring. I delight, because of that well-nigh unique memory, to acclaim here, in Zona Gale, an actually accomplished writer who actually can "speak," and with whom "speaking" is a fine art finely practised. To the other side, without any unwise name-calling, I think of a woman who has published sundry volumes of the most bland and charming essays ever penned by an American, and of her dictatorial, her sullen, and her gross conduct of the one lecture I was fated to hear her deliver. That was an all-tragic afternoon, which robbed me forever of any further pleasure in the writings of an over large and regrettably vocal snapping turtle.

The epiphany of this harridan remains to me, I repeat, a continued distress—and yet, only in degree. For how many other soul-chilling, how many haggardly vivacious females do I recall, all of whom "spoke" upon the inconsequent ground that they knew more or less about writing! And with what circumspection did I shun their books afterward!

II.

As for male authors, I clap one hand on my heart, and rest the other hand on the family Bible, in the while I protest that every one of them whom I have heard "speak" showed then at his worst.

Even did he orate smoothly, without fidgets, without forlornly clearing his throat, and without too often seeking respite in the ice-water pitcher, yet did his inane utterance glisten, as it were, with the greasy high-mindedness and the tin-plated good-fellowship which no public speaker can very well avoid. In most cases this did not matter, because the majority of us who write badly enough to be in demand as lecturers are charlatans or bunglers at all seasons: but to observe bedizened in any such humbug the man of real talent is painful.

It is painful because there drift about in that more rarefied air of the platform some fumes, some straying gases, which affect the intelligence. A few victims these effluvia reduce to gulping, to the conscientious coughing of Camille, or to blank merciful unintelligibility: but the more hapless they intoxicate *coram populo*. And as a pragmatic people, we have learned to accept this fact. We do not note, as a rule, how wildly does the babblement made upon platforms by the habitués of this dire eminence differ from the at least relatively sane speech of our school-teachers and our politicians and our clergy in their private life. It is tacitly understood by everybody that, when "speaking", the professional "speaker" expects his sentiments to be received at a liberal discount, and upon this full dress occasion will introduce no one of his beliefs in their working clothes.

All oratory I, in brief, (with the appropriate glibness of a person who knows nothing whatever about it) take to be an art with its own formal conventions. I am at any event certain it is an art through which none may attain to self-expression; and in this respect it differs by a world's width from authorship.

I mean that the writer, at his desk, so long as he toils over the progress of composition, can imagine that somewhere outside the door of his study an intelligent and sympathetic audience, well worth all painstaking, awaits his masterpiece. To that "acute but honorable minority" he can address himself freely, with glad confidence, and without compromise.

Let no such happy man turn lecturer! I entreat, with an emotion, you may note, which rises

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naturally into blank verse. For when once this misled visionary mounts the platform, he becomes conscious that no supermen assemble to honor him. His flesh and blood audience is not even, in any real sense, sympathetic: at best it stays receptive, waiting to be wooed, waiting to be roused into approval of him, by its own standards. He perceives, too, that this audience (in common with any audience ever assembled anywhere) is not, or at least is not pre-eminently, intelligent. As a whole it very much prefers, it demands, and it awaits, those sleek false formulæ which the wise honor with lip service in public. So the entrapped word-monger begins with his "Ladies and gentlemen," and after loosing this trial balloon of fancy he is soon well under way in imaginative truckling.

I have been privileged at odd times to sit serene and dutiless, upon the rostrum whence some less lucky author was presently to address his public; and I have considered his raw material. No ever did the spectacle prove exhilarating: never did I covet his job. To be applauded by such people seemed to me, in all honesty, compromising. Sloth, and ostentation, and a timid lechery, and light-headedness, and self-conceit, and disapproval, and inattention, and boredom, I found over plainly inscribed on the raised faces turned usward. And in yet more liberal quantities, of course, was to be seen gaping at us that dull-mindedness which continues to betray an uncoerced people into paying for, and even into using, tickets for a lecture.

III

Now I daresay, my dear Dorothy, that these are the prevailing traits in any human assemblage of the better sort when one views it without prejudice. I admit that, by and large, it is to just this partially cultured audience every American artist must appeal. But my point is that the American author who is seduced into lecturing cannot any more evade this discouraging fact: night after night he faces directly his potential admirers, in the persons of you and of the other flibbertigibbet students and of the depressed faculty and of their frowsy friends. He regards perforce this squatted herd of Mammalia at close range. No further delusion is possible. He sees immediately before him his paymasters, in the sensual, the indifferent, the chuckle-headed, and the smug middle-classes of an imperfectly civilized nation, upon whose favor and whose shifty whims he and his famousness and all our national art are dependent, at the last pinch.

The point is, furthermore, that no intelligent person in such circumstances will elect to speak with intelligence. Instead, "subdued", as the phrase runs, "to what he works in", he will cannily assume the thin virtues, the high-minded illogic, and the false good-humor which all better-thought-of Americans admire; he will prattle; and he will thus earn his lecture fee honestly, by purveying the sane and edifying entertainment he promised.

But the more wise, the more cautious writer, remains snug in his study, at play with his words, and happily imagining that he addresses an all-worthy audience. That audience is in some sense the masterwork of every writer's invention. That audience does not exist anywhere in flesh, and at bottom he knows this. But in his bemused fancy that audience exists clearly enough throughout the while that he writes, and for that while it contents him.