

WRITING WITHOUT TEARS

by BRANCH CABELL

IT was flattering of you, sir, to ask that I explain the unhappy lot of the American literary artist. I replied therefore by return post. And after typing out my heartbroken regrets for my inability to join in the symposium which your magazine is conducting, I began sorrowfully to reflect that this sort of nonsense is quite probably immortal.

In any case, all this public self-pitying by our less popular writers is but formally allied with facts. I think it, for example, a not irrelevant fact that the persons who are most volubly bothered by the lot of the literary artist in America happen not to be literary artists. And in saying this I intend, I assure you, no reproach. To the contrary, so often as I hear the laments of Upton Sinclair and V. F. Calverton and Granville Hicks and Ludwig Lewisohn and so on, "when in a wailful choir the small gnats sing," then I reflect, with the most kindly sort of sympathy, that for years these gentlemen have been doing their very utmost to become literary artists. I mean only that in reading their bewailments of America's literary tastes one remembers at all times that the fate of these elegists, as writers, would have been equally uncondemned to optimism in any other country, merely because they were born with no talent for writing. It seems unfair: but at this date, what is anybody to do about it? I mean, in brief, that you will not find any writer whom a respectable quorum of judges might rank as important, or even as a fairly competent craftsman, bewailing the lot of the literary artist in America.

Here, I admit, enters the complication that some of our now elderly and best authors (as our modest best averages) have during the not distant past made considerable money by their writing. It was an indiscretion which laid them open to being rebuked, by less fortunate persons, as degraded slaves and foul panders to the capitalist system. Such parasites, their indignant rivals might well remark, were in any discussion of *æsthetics hors concours*. (Human nature being what it is, the actual remark was a great deal more uncivil.) To-day, however, when indigence has become epidemic, under the able guidance of Col. Roosevelt's best-known cousin, this reproach is far out-of-date. To-day these cashiered hirelings, like everybody else, are earning very little money, now that the strange old American custom of buying books has perished—and still, it is to be noted, the obstinate creatures keep silent as to the sad lot of the artist in America. That is because, my dear sir, they happen actually to be artists, whom their art contents in its own special, illogical and high fashion.

For my part, in looking backward, I can but wonder at this perennial pother. Nothing, it seems to me, interferes with the American writer except his own frailty. I at least have been writing now for the third part of a century. Throughout this while I have been permitted to write exactly what I wanted to write and to publish as much of it as I desired. I have not (I pause to observe, in mere self-defense) made any ponderable money out of authorship: and for my publisher's sake I regret this. Personally, I do not see upon what grounds I should be paid for having diverted myself throughout thirty-three years hand running.

I continue to look back. I remember that what I have published in magazine form during the last thirty-three years has now and then suffered from a little genteel editing—in which, even at its silliest, the humor atoned for the prudery. I recall, for example, how Henry M. Alden (with I prefer not to imagine what shakings of his grand gray head) struck out from my text a "belly" in favor of a "paunch," on the same high principle that, somewhat later, Henry S. Canby substituted "life" where I had horrifically, but at least rationally, typed "semen." And I recollect how yet another well-known Henry blushing made complete nonsense out of one of my paragraphs by putting, at first "love," and then "sex," in place of "coition." But, almost always, this editing took the shape of excisions such as, in a great many cases, even I could see were improvements. And in any event I was left free to remedy every bit of this editing when the essay or the short story came to its final estate in book form, so that no permanent hurt was done.

Just once, I can recall also, I have found pressed against one of my books (because it appeared to speak lightly of papal infallibility) a quite frankly trumped-up charge of lewdness. Even at the time the illogic of this seemed amusing. The upshot, at all events, was a collapse of the pious fraud, in due course, with no more harmful results than to advertise this particular book at the expense of its fellows, and handsomely to increase its sales.

Well, then, my dear sir, with these negligible exceptions, nobody has ever tried in any degree to interfere with, or to check, or to color, my writing whatsoever I elected to write during the last thirty-three years. Throughout that period I have enjoyed a free hand, a quota of applause, and a gratifying belittlement by the more literal-minded. It follows that (despite some native talents for exaggerating any personal mishap) I am not able to feel martyred by my American birth or by my dependency on an American audience. So far as goes my personal experience, the American writer, during the last thirty-three years, has been permitted, and to a certain extent encouraged, to do the very best of which he was capable. And if—just now and then—that best happened, after all, not to be in every one of its features an earth-staggering masterpiece, this outcome may well have been (I suggest diffidently) not so much the fault of America's cultural crassness as of its writer's failure to start life as a genius of the first order. Occasionally, babies forget to do that.

For the rest, I incline here to resent the far too common assumption that the artist in letters has, in some way, a semi-divine right to expect from his art a living wage. That notion really is a bit too irrational to be cherished even by *Homo sapiens*, because all experience contradicts it. All literary history shows that the beginning author has entered his name in a lottery in which the haphazardly awarded prizes are few and not huge. In every known civilization the literary artist has at times earned a moderate living, as with Thackeray and Shakespeare and Virgil, and at other times has earned virtually nothing, as with Gissing and Villon and Ovid. In America the case is not otherwise: nor do I know, upon the whole, of any reason why the case ought to be otherwise.

"Literature is a fine staff, but a poor crutch," runs the old saying. I think this a profound saying: for from every standpoint of morality, as well as from the natural standpoint of his dependents, it is wicked for a writer to depend solely upon his art for his alimony. Indeed, toward his art also his first duty is to inherit, rather early in life, a large income, so that he may always write only that which he desires to write, for his own diversion. I take it that a writer who has neglected this obligation must expect to see both his art and himself suffer. For when once he has put his muse to work to support him, then he becomes in some sort a pimp; and he is but too apt to develop a melting eye for pragmatic values. He observes, perhaps, the more liberally paying magazines with new charity; or he turns, it may be, from regarding his own indigent household with compassion, to regarding Hollywood with envy.

Nevertheless, my dear sir, in no symposium as to the sad lot of the artist in America will any truth-loving writer who has attained middle life elect to shed typographic tears. He knows that, to the contrary, in America his lot has for a great while been enviable. Year in, year out, he has done precisely that which he wanted to do, the despair and the reprehension of the thrifty. To-day those few of his thrifty advisers who are neither in prison nor, as yet, out on bail, are in bankruptcy. But the confirmed writer (to whom bankruptcy can reveal at worst only the trite features of a long familiar neighbor) is whistling in his writing room now that he sets to work, with a large contentment, upon his some-and-twentieth book.