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FOR RHADAMANTHUS, SMILING

BEING THE SECOND OF A SERIES OF FIVE OPEN LETTERS

by Branch Cabell

IT WAS kindly of you, dear master, to send your review of my book; and all which you have to say of me therein is so affable I can entertain no least doubt that upon this special occasion you suffer from the fatal virtue of meaning well. The emotion with which I address you should in consequence be gratitude: it is a sad commentary upon human nature that to the contrary I approach you in envy.

With a most despairing envy do I regard the estate of you and of all your peers who write book reviews, disposing equably of your praise and your blame to us who write mere books as your underlings. That consciousness of one's own human fallibility which preys now and then upon lesser mortals gives you a wide berth (if one may thus far understate matters) and does not rear insidiously upon Olympus its interrogative head: no uncertainty plagues you: you do not voice opinions, but judgements, in tones which may perhaps remain jocular, or even friendly, but which know not ever any taint of self-distrust. How in the world, dear master, do you manage it? How does one raise, we will say, a proper self-respect to quite that pitch and luxuriance? I have seen you and talked with you, and I so know you to be a normally conducted person in private life; and I can but wonder what afflatus descends upon and possesses you, in common with all your fellow practitioners, when you set to work to dispose of your daily book?

Three assumptions you of your craft must perforce make: that what you have to say is of some importance, that it will be respectfully weighed by an audience of fair magnitude, and that you are superior, at least slightly superior, to the author whom you have under consideration. That last tenet, in fact, is very often true: masterpieces do not visit your desk every day; and your condescensions are then justified. The difficulty, to the one side, is that a book of such costive merits as not to outweigh your own fugitive journalism is quite obviously not worth the pains of reviewing; to the other side, there occur now and then those awkward moments when your betters come up before you for judgement.

I can still recall, for example, your review of Rudyard Kipling's last book. It was, as reviews go, an entertaining production, urbane and clement, but decisive. You attended the funeral of a once distinguished talent; you admitted civilly the Victorian achievements of Mr. Kipling, not profound work perhaps, but still quite so-so; and you deplored that his gifts, such as they once were, should all have lapsed into dotage. You were wholly convincing as to Mr. Kipling's past, present, and future, during the ten minutes it took to read your article, and I found myself in a cordial glow of agreement.

At the eleventh minute it occurred to me, as a most unfair circumstance, that Mr. Kipling's last book would be duly incorporated

into his collected works, to survive there, if not as the main ornament of the collection, at least as a lasting addition; and that this book would continue to be reprinted and to be read, some while after both our demises, by a fair number of persons who will never even know that your article was written. It occurred to me, in brief, that your so nicely expressed, your judicious, and your really brilliant opinion of Mr. Kipling was for all practical intent valueless.

You were dealing, through no fault of your own, with your superior; you were not, and even today are not, dear master, Mr. Kipling's equal, by any imaginable standards. You were passing judgement where your jurisdiction happened not to hold, somewhat as if the National Council of Monaco were to vote an amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Meanwhile the necessity put upon you by the requirements of your trade, during these irrelevant formalities, to patronize and to correct Mr. Kipling, did for the time display you in a light so uncaptivating that I am sure we can all rejoice it was but a will-o'-the-wisp glitter, gone forever within the same moment it was apparent, when the esteemed journal to which you contribute was laid aside.

In very much the same way did you dispose of Bernard Shaw's last publication, and (for very much the same reasons) here again did you suggest that your taste and your judgement, and your commonsense even, are allowed a vacation whensoever you deal with a major figure in current letters. It is perhaps as well: for in all such instances you face an *impasse*. Just as Shakespeare is not to be deduced in his great entity from *King Lear* alone, or from *Twelfth Night* alone, or from *Titus Andronicus* alone, equally is it impossible for any writer with a career so long, so various, and so glittering as is the career of

Mr. Shaw to be judged by any one of his productions; and that is the sole criterion allowed to them of your craft. Mr. Shaw, I would put it, has erected during the last forty years a secure edifice: and you attempted, you attempted perforce, to appraise its architecture by discussing one of its bricks.

You could but add to the droll falsity of your position by condescending to Mr. Shaw during the process, and this you did with a large gusto. Your comedy was of the first order. You were not, as your readers quite understood, the equal of Mr. Shaw, by any imaginable standards: but you could play, with a well practised art, that you were immeasurably his superior. So you entertained us all by dispensing patronage and grave gibes and aggrieved head-shakings where you owed deference; and by making in every other respect a delightfully solemn ass of yourself, dear master, after the very best tradition and the immemorial privilege of your trade whensoever you encounter genius.

It must be to you, I imagine, a sound and unfailing comfort that we few persons who read your articles can get through any one of them within ten minutes, once and for all: thereafter the crumpled paper you adorn goes to the waste basket, *en route* to the Salvation Army wagon, and nobody thinks any more about your morning's masterpiece. You are thus made immune to that "hobgoblin of little minds" which is called consistency. It is a position I desiderate. But my deeper envy is reserved for the frame of mind in which you labour; for some of those masterly articles which delight and edify us for ten minutes may take even longer to compose; and to imagine oneself the superior of Bernard Shaw or of Rudyard Kipling for a whole quarter of an hour should be to any hack writer a delusion exhilarating enough to brighten the entire day.

And that, dear master, is but a beginning. There is no bound to your multitudinary and endless pleasures. From a new book by Mr. Hergesheimer or by Mr. Sinclair Lewis, or by Ellen Glasgow or Edith Wharton, or by any other writer of praiseworthy achievements, you extract the same hurtless delight in the while that you play at being more important than some one of these really important persons. You do not, I suppose, imagine in uninspired hours that your position in letters compares favourably with the position of, let us say, Ellen Glasgow. You must know, in your milder moments, that it behoves any living reviewer to approach Ellen Glasgow with obeisances. Yet, when once the afflatus of reviewing informs you, you can patronize and reprove, and put her to rights generally, without the least qualm.

It does not seem droll to you, not then, that you should instruct a genius such as you do not possess how to practise an art in which you do not pretend to competence. For I think you are quite honest about it. There appears to be something about the mere physical act of writing a review which begets a fine kindling of self-confidence and a deific state of mind such as less privileged persons induce with alcohol. There is no writer but must envy all them of your craft, who partake of this supernal pleasure at will.

For the inexperienced, the young, and the ignorant, the divine brew of reviewing is a tippie too heady. It follows that upon the nominally literary page of the local Sunday paper in many lesser cities one may find the "cub reporters", those helots of journalism, exhibited, after the old Spartan fashion, very much in their cups, as they babble there in befuddled gravity as to the month's new books. They know, these unfortunate young, they well know in their sober moments, that upon no subject beneath the sun is their

opinion of any value: it is their calling instead to elicit daily the opinion of more mature persons as to this or the other topic, and to get it all quite wrong, with a touching deference: yet when once they are tipsified with the strong wine of reviewing (with which the proficient and established reporter declines to meddle), then does all decorum depart from these striplings.

They will then prophesy pot-valiantly; they will reel in reprobation and stagger in reason; they will wallow in the vomit of their turbid sentences, thence belching forth the tetchiness and the profound distinctions of the inebriated, thence patronizing their masters beerily, thence hiccuping their misprints with a large gravity: and none living knows of their meaning. Nor, for that matter, does anybody bother to inquire. Before long, though, the managing editor, that catchpenny Argus, does observe that the unreadable is not read, and he then makes an end of this unseemly exhibit. That is the history of every literary page in every small-town paper; such is the complete saga of the reviewer's craft in our provinces: and upon the whole it ends happily.

But I wander from you, dear master, who have learned to quaff of this tippie in all dignity, without any open drunkenness. I speak of young failings which are quite alien to you, in whom I can detect indeed but two failings. For, in the first place, you did, you know, well, but you did, publish that novel. An admirer must here necessarily stammer. And I pause too to wonder that so few of you Olympians can refrain from this indiscretion. It is not apposite, it is almost shocking, for your reverers to find trudging in such lowly fields the feet of Gamaliel. Yet almost every one of you does by-and-by publish a novel. And in every case it has led the reflective to note all its author's subsequent

remarks about other persons' novels with a shaken reverence. It has led many to suspect that its author really did not know much about novel-writing: and this fact (they have whispered) no professional judge of novels can afford to establish with documentary evidence. Mr. Waldo Frank, they remark, has now for a long while laboured at criticism, but he has not yet succeeded in living down those novels of his late nonage, which set for him a task to baffle Methuselah.

Nor is this the only consideration involved. When a hitherto so well-thought-of Olympian as Miss Rebecca West or Mr. Edmund Wilson has brought forth a novel, both charity and commonsense have led us to concede that almost anybody might have written it; merely to write *The Judge* or *I Thought of Daisy* was, thus, condonable: yet to publish either book did seem to prove the incriminated person a poor critic of literary values. But I avoid speaking of such mysteries any further, lest I appear to prattle unreverently about the august. And of your novel also, dear master, I say, with a commensurably fine touch of scholarship, *De mortuis* —

One other failing you have exhibited, and it enabled me, I admit, to enjoy talking with you. But then an author always does, to my experience, enjoy talking with his reviewers. An author likes, most naturally, when the review has been favourable, to meet a person of marked intelligence; if to the contrary the review has belittled and excoriated, then does the author enjoy meeting its writer for less noble reasons. Let us not pry into these reasons, beyond granting the sad axiom that no sort of writing can be taken quite seriously after you have once considered the writer in person.

That is the precise point, dear master: reviewers should have no epiphany: for to find the oracle but a harmless boy, or a bald and

dried up, fidgeting small fellow in nose-glasses, or a serious-minded young clumsy oaf behind large tortoise-shell spectacles—or, in brief, to find the oracle merely human—does forthwith puff up an author's so readily expansive vanity. And it was this creature (he reflects, in his blasphemy, as he gazes with far more of happiness than of veneration upon the Olympian), it was this maternal error, this ort, which spoke belittlement and vitriol and all reprobation as to my genius!

Then is the soul of that author exalted to a degree unbecoming the estate of an underling: then does *hubris* possess him, so that he babbles affably, as a man discourses with his equal. He reveres no longer. He does not even quail. I myself, when I met Messrs. Corey Ford and Henry S. Canby and Seward Collins, all three together, in the clear lighting of one memorable afternoon, was not really frightened, I remember. It is therefore in the rôle of a confessed penitent that I declare such sacrilege ought to be avoided. And two remedies suggest themselves. The one is that an Olympian should go veiled among authors, the other (the more cruel perhaps, yet the more effective way) being that at such times an Olympian should wear upon his breast a sufficiently large mirror.

So far have I strayed from speaking of that triple faith which sustains you in your sublime labours. I now return to this matter. As a reviewer you must believe always, I repeat, that what you have to say is of some importance, and that it will be respectfully weighed by an audience of fair magnitude. Well, there is no human being but lives under the happy delusion that his own utterance is of importance: your task in this precinct is easy. But when it comes to the magnitude of a reviewer's audience, your faith and your imagination must, in ungracious, negligible, mere logic, be put to a strain more trying.

One confronts here a point whereon opinions are free, and free to differ. Yet two considerations stay undeniable. It is a perhaps regrettable but certain fact that the majority of persons do not ever read the literary page in the paper they read daily: their concern is with such trivialities as the gaudier murders, the foreign outlook, or the stock market. It is another fact (amenable to much the same description) that favourable or unfavourable reviews do not remarkably alter the sales of a book; and the one thing which every publisher knows (even nowadays, when none of them any longer pretends to know everything) remains the axiom that, by and large, books "sell" in accordance with the informal criticism of word-of-mouth comment. Neither of these two considerations suggests, dear master, that millions of persons weigh your least utterance with quite that reverence which I could desire.

I deduce, instead, that the three tenets to which as a self-respecting reviewer you are committed, stay, to say the least of it, not even debatable; and here again envy awakes, flamingly, for I now covet your resemblance to the White Queen, in being able to believe three impossible things, if not always before breakfast, at any rate some time during each working day. And I debate if upon Olympus you are never visited by doubts if your labours there serve any practical ends?

I know that, in my own humble sphere, I continue to wonder what may be the *raison d'être*, as the learned say, and the precise justification of book reviewing? In a country wherein so many hundreds of thousands of book reviews are published every month, it must be that this never-idle industry supplies some national if obscure need. Yet who profits? I demand of myself, striking duly the pensive breast, and evoking thence naught save the most tiny of eructations.

From his own necessarily sordid standpoint the publisher, as I have said, perceives that the reviewers' "free copies" of every book he publishes are an unavoidable business expense rather than a promising investment. And the author is beyond help. His book has been electrotyped and distributed some weeks ago, so that, heed he never so fondly the oracle, its reproof and advice cannot aid him now; with his ship already at sea, he cannot well undertake to recarve more delicately its figurehead, or to reorder the personnel of his crew, no matter what saith the godlike voice.

As for the reading public, what are they to make of your divine craft, dear master, when so many oracles speak and all speak diversely? For the omniscient do not without any exception agree: twelve times each year, let it be noted, do those very worshipful Doctors, Van Doren and Canby, decide each for his own book club upon the mensual pre-eminence of our newest books, and in this way, upon precisely a dozen occasions annually, is the fact revealed that the one or the other errs. Rascoe is not always at one with Gannett; where Isabel Paterson commends, Miss Fanny Butcher may elect to live up to her surname; and one has known H. L. Mencken and Seward Collins to regard the same volume variously. When the Olympians thus disagree, they provide us with darkened counsel. So must the book-buyer lack any assured guide through a jungle of tropical blurbs, because the Olympians do disagree, invariably. And what the reading public gets out of all this exalted dissension, I am sure I do not know.

I know only that when I look over my scrapbooks I wonder if any one of my book reviews remains worth the seven-and-a-half cents it cost me? About the unpleasant ones I, being human, do not bother; nothing came

of them: I surrender these, in enjoyably large numbers, to the oblivion which they have earned. But the columns upon columns of printed plaudits, with all those typographic huzzas, now forever pied, these trouble me. I perceive that, like Sir Andrew Aguecheek, I was adored once, and nothing seems to have come of that either. It does not seem fair that all the incense should have burned out quite as quickly as did the stink bombs.

When I published my last book, for example, did not Mr. Newton Arvin acclaim my superb humour, and Mr. Louis Kronenberger hymn my titanic genius, and Mr. Basil Davenport find in my prose style "the luxuriousness of Swinburne"? Did not Mr. Gorham B. Munson rank me, in his best scholastic manner, with "Shakespeare, Milton *et alia*"? The questions are purely rhetorical: and perhaps at this distance in time I may have quoted none of these gentlemen verbatim. Indeed, now I think of it, I believe that Mr. Davenport mistook the meaning of "luxuriousness", and Mr. Munson of "*et alia*", in a different connection. It seems so, at least. Yet I cannot understand why, when both of them make so many delightful blunders of this sort continually, I should remember these two special felicities unless I had therein some special interest.

However, that does not matter. My point is merely that whether the aforementioned quartet of sub-Olympians said the aforementioned things, or said quite other things, or said nothing at all, it comes at the year's end to the same sum total: it comes to nothing. My point is that all reviewing, in so far as I can see, does but corrupt, and so waste eventually, not only such minor talents, but those really considerable talents which everywhere help to manure this ever-flowering but fruitless tree of all knowledge. I observe, in short, with Andrew Lang: "Reviewing there needs

must be; but how unhappy were the necessities, how deplorable the vein, that compelled or seduced a man of your eminence into the dusty and stony ways of contemporary criticism".

It is with you a favourite topic, I note, to lament the publishing, year after year, of too many futile books by the hundreds; yet you do not deplore (or, at least, not publicly) the thousands upon thousands of futile book-reviews which appear every week. You do not exhort us (in any appropriate garb of sackcloth and ashes) to observe that at each year's end some few of its books survive, but that all the book reviews, for which forests have perished, have perished too.

All have perished, dear master, and your sublime labours are at one with the labours of Hercules. Along with the slain Hydra and conquered Cerberus and the cleaned stables of Augeus, oblivion has digested placidly the wit, the insouciance, the erudition; the rare benevolence, the discoverer's glow, and the lofty prophesying; the pæans, the sarcasms, and the demolitions; the putting of everybody (including poor old Jehovah) in exactly his proper place; the profound comprehension of human nature, of social conditions, of the future, and of every known art and science; and, above all, that unswerving infallibility to which no other being can pretend with a straight face. At the year's end it is as though these glories had never been. In the back files of magazines and of newspapers, there only, all these virtues lie disregarded: your splendours all are faded; and of your magnanimity survives upon earth no fruitage.

People will not even remember until the crack of doom the very handsome things which you have said about my new book, and your praise of me will hardly outlast the planet. It seems a great pity.