

"Ultra Crepidam"

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL.

THOUGH, indeed, my title need deter nobody. It merely indicates that as one result of reading Capt. Rupert Hughes' article on "Literature and Life"—which is a curiously learned performance, even for a Western Reserve graduate—I discovered its most civil summing up in the back of the dictionary, to which I, too, had turned to cull a trifle of erudition. For, of course, I have read this article, with all that interest which none but those at seeing himself rebuked in print, as well as with, I trust, appropriate regard that the captain did not in any way approve of my paper on "Literature and Life."

I very honestly deplore this circumstance in accordance with its actual importance. Still, various causes combine to prevent my entering into any serious discussion of Capt. Hughes' literary ideals, either as explained in his article or as exemplified in his books. The latter, as the phrase is, speak for themselves; and render it superfluous to question that the auctorial virtues which Capt. Hughes especially prizes—such as "grandeur, horror, sublimity, and ferocity"—are very adequately displayed in "The Music Lovers' Cyclopaedia" and in "The Lady Who Smoked Cigars."

But about these matters I do not propose to write, however alluringly they tempt consideration. For it seems more the point quite humbly to explain that these little essays of mine now being printed in THE SUNDAY TRIBUNE are extracts from a volume, to be called "Beyond Life," which I believe, when published in its entirety, will reveal between Capt. Hughes and myself no difference so wide as to be undesirable. It is merely that Capt. Hughes, in the impetuous way of these bluff military fellows, has seized upon a brick, in part to prove that a building's architecture is all wrong; and incidentally, of course, to leave at the architect's head. I can but dodge him with that deference which is today the captain's due from all well wishers of literature, even though he has but temporarily abandoned novel writing.

Meanwhile, his main contention—that literary affairs in America are not very strikingly dissimilar to what they have always been in every land—is one of the contretemps which "Beyond Life" especially laments; and inasmuch as here as elsewhere Capt. Hughes pursues me along lines of argument which I have very lately traveled, with results that are presently to appear in THE TRIBUNE, this scarcely seems the happiest place wherein to controvert these arguments. For two of his most telling "points" indeed—as to such dissimilar matters as the employment of prose-poets by actors, and of improbable dialogue by novelists—the curious may find that I had actually anticipated, in the second extract from "Beyond Life," as published a week before the captain was moved to attack me, with an ingenuity hitherto devoted to the contrivance of mysterious murders, and an indignation until this reserved for the iniquity of millionaires.

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AND yet, no less, with the main assertion of Capt. Hughes nobody could possibly take issue. It is undeniable that there have always been writers who were unable to venture in imagination beyond the orbit of their daily lives and substanzas for thought; and so have devoted their talents to the making of ephemeral chronicles of ephemeral conditions, to the delight of a vast number of equally unimaginative readers. And, for my part, I esteem it eminently praiseworthy modesty in the author of "What Will People Say?" and of "Empty Pockets" thus to be the very first to insist that his performances are in no way unique.

Nor would I willingly omit to express appreciation of the fact that to his presentment of truisms Capt. Hughes has loaned the inestimable ornament of humor. For there can be little doubt that the captain's remarkable display of erudition is a joke that was intentional. In our first bewildered glow of astonishment to discover that Capt. Rupert Hughes is interested in and even has theories about literature, any one of us might pass over his comments upon Greek writers, say, as Gradgrindian stuff quite seriously intended.

Yet none upon a second reading could fail to perceive that the humor of it all is very fairly describable as Aristophanic, if but in that a foot note is usually required to explain it. Though, indeed, I doubt if for the captain's jokes a foot note is always necessary. His contention, for example, that Greek tragedy ought not to be appraised "as if Sophocles and Euripides and their contemporaries summed up Greek dramatic art," but only after comparing all the other Attic dramatists, has certainly a ring so plausible that for the moment one is gulled; yet instantly reflection suggests that the work of these other dramatists has perished a many centuries ago; and you wonder how Capt. Hughes proposes to set about making a study of them, and so perceive that he is voicing his sturdy military humor.

Thereafter all is pleasant sailing, once you have recognized that the captain has not taken leave of his senses but merely of seriousness, and is joyously introducing into an overglum discussion of unread books the literary standards to which he has most advantageously adhered in the Red Book. For then it appears not quite inexplicable to find even Homer cited as a thoroughgoing "realist" on the plea that he depicts his characters as eating three meals a day. Nor will the initiated then quarrel with the statement that the lyrics of Aristophanes were like the musical comedy lyrics of today," and offer to point out some trivial difference between the choruses of "The Clouds" and of "I May Be Home for a Long, Long Time." And every one will merrily agree with Capt. Hughes that the "Persians" of Aeschylus, with its scene laid at Susa and the main role enacted by a ghost, ought to be regarded as a "realistic" study of Athenian society. For this is just a way, as you perceive at last, that these bluff military fellows have of sailing.

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THEN, too, this granted, it becomes doubly pleasant to note how Capt. Hughes facetiously clinches his Grecian dicta with the statement, "And then there were the unspeakable knockabout farces that ended the show." After that sweeping stroke it seems, of course, the least sort of hair-splitting to point

out that just one of these satyric dramas remains to us, in the "Cyclops" of Euripides; that this is based upon a highly romantic episode from "The Odyssey" and is neither "knockabout" nor particularly "unspeakable"; and that concerning no other satyric drama ever produced in Athens can Capt. Hughes or any one else pretend to speak with any authority save that of casual mentions which indicate these dramas to have resembled "Tommy Rot" and "Excuse Me" far less closely than anybody would image from the captain's description.

Nor equally, of course, will an intelligent person here descend to any such prosaic hair-splitting. Instead, one one must continue to fall in with the jest.

However, Capt. Hughes can very well afford to take these jovial little liberties with logic because the thread of his main argument, I must concede, is sound. The admission goes sadly against the grain, since, being human, I would like intensely to dispute his argument; and it is a comfort to reflect that I have probably damaged it considerably by writing a book to support it.

Thus there seems to be no real conflict between the general contention of Capt. Hughes and the actual trend of that small luckless essay which he has elected very dexterously to assail with his habitual vigor and with his unwontedly clever burlesque of erudition. Meanwhile I have pointed out that there always have been writers who practiced their art quite seriously. And Capt. Hughes has retorted that along with these have always coexisted a far greater number of artisans who wrote amusing and ephemeral plays and books against the needs of honest persons now and then to "kill off" an hour or two innocuously. I question not at all the truth of the captain's statement, but merely what conceivable connection it has with literature. And I take it that the evinced desire to quote a precedent for one's vocation shows honorably enough in both of us.