

STATUS RERUM



A Manifesto, Upon The Present
Condition of
Northwestern Literature



Containing Several Near-Libellous
Utterances, Upon
Persons in the Public Eye



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I

The present condition of literature in the Northwest has been mentioned apologetically too long. Something is wrong with Northwestern literature. It is time people were bestirring themselves to find out what it is.

Other sections of the United States can mention their literature, as a body, with respect. New England, the Middle West, New Mexico and the Southwest, California—each of these has produced a body of writing of which it can be proud. The Northwest—Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana—has produced a vast quantity of bilge, so vast, indeed, that the few books which are entitled to respect are totally lost in the general and seemingly interminable avalanche of tripe.

It is time people were seeking the cause of this. Is there something about the climate, or the soil, which inspires people to write tripe? Is there some occult influence, which catches them young, and shapes them to be instruments out of which tripe, and nothing but tripe, may issue?

Influence there certainly is, and shape them it certainly does. Every written work, however contemptible and however trivial it may be, is conceived and wrought to court the approbation of some tribunal. If the tribunal be contemptible, then equally contemptible will be the work which courts it.

And the tribunals are contemptible.

From Salem, Oregon, from the editorial offices of one Col. Hofer, issues, in a monthly periodical somewhat inexplicably called “The Lariat,” an agglomeration of doggerel which comprises the most colossal imbecility, the most preposterous bathos, the most superb sublimity of metrical ineptitude, which the patience and perverted taste of man has ever availed to bring between covers. And Col. Hofer encourages it. He battens upon it. Somewhere within the dark recesses of this creature’s—we will not say soul, but nebulous sentience—is some monstrous chord which vibrates to these invertebrate twitterings.

In a healthy condition of society, this state of things would be merely funny. As things are, it is not funny. It is deeply tragic. Northwestern po-

etry, seeking, in the ingenuousness of its youth, some center about which to weave its fabric, has done no less than bind itself in thralldom to Col. Hofer and his astounding magazine, and the results are all too pathetically apparent. Read some of it!

Or contemplate the panorama of emotional indigestion, the incredible conglomeration of unleavened insipidity, spread before your eyes in the works of the Northwest Poetry Society; the begauded pastries of the Seattle "Muse and Mirror," which surfeit without satisfying. Regard the versicles emanating from the poetry classes of Prof. Glenn Hughes, of the University of Washington—a banquet of breath-tablets, persistently and impotently violet! Regard—but enough! "Palms," exotic *frijole* congealing, among the firs of Aberdeen, you need not trouble to savor.

II

If this were all, it would be too much. Regrettably, we have still to contemplate a literary influence which has been, if possible, even more degrading. The Northwest has not escaped, any more than other sections of the United States, its share of "naturals," mental weaklings, numskulls, homosexuals, and other victims of mental and moral affliction. Unfortunately, our advanced civilization has neglected to provide an outlet for their feeble and bizarre, energies. Yet, many of these unfortunate creatures are unfit even to teach school. What are they to do? In Chicago, the problem would be simple. There, such unfortunates can devote themselves to the service of some gang-leader, and gain a livelihood in the professions of bootlegging, blackmail and murder. In the South, they are privileged to lead active lives as members of the Ku Klux Klan, and appear prominently at nocturnal whipping-parties and Fundamentalist crusades. Such inoffensive and normal employments have, unfortunately, no place in our Northwestern civilization. What, then, are these unfortunates to do? Such puerile faculties as they may chance to possess demand some exercise. To deny them it would be inhuman.

The earliest white colonies more merciful than we, found them normal employment. The lumber companies of that age availed themselves of the unfortunates of their time, for the purpose of filing upon timber-lands,

then in the possession of a too suspicious Government. They were found useful instruments for murdering Chinese laundrymen and tracklaborers, thus establishing the supremacy of the Caucasian race. For hanging Basque and Mexican sheep-herders, and destroying sheep, by theft, poison, firearms, or dynamite, civilization has gained much from their exertions. We do not grudge them their meed of veneration.

But civilization, with impersonal cruelty, has used them and passed on. The agricultural commonwealth has given place to the industrial empire. What can we give our own numskulls, "naturals," homosexuals, and mentally afflicted, to do? How can we even rid ourselves of the annoyance of their society? To our industrial leaders, the answer is simple. Put them where they will do no harm. Put them where their imbecility will be congenially occupied. Obviously, they could not be trusted to manufacture rocking-chairs, to pile lumber, to operate donkey-engines, or combined harvesters; to shear sheep, or castrate calves; in the operation of woolen, paper and flour mills, their employment would be a continual jeopardy, not only to themselves, but to the lives of men valuable in the industries which they serve. Fortunately, no doubt, for Northwestern industry, but calamitously for the welfare of Northwestern literature, an employment has been developed which offers the advantages of congeniality and inoffensiveness, without entailing the least risk to the continued prosperity of our factories, so much desired by all. That employment is, briefly, short-story writing.

III

From this cause, from the humane sentiments which desire to find harmless employment for these poor creatures, has come that pullulating institution, the short-story writing class. Teachers were, of course, easily recruited. As chiropractors, prohibition agents, saxophone players, radio announcers, and movie organists, have been seduced from more strenuous walks of life, such as pants-pressing, curve-greasing, track-walking, lumber-piling, tin-roofing, and cascara-bark-stripping, by the superior usufructs of a life of authority without backache, so, and from these or similar walks, have been recruited our teachers of short-story writing.

Nor, have they succumbed to this seduction without honor. On the head and shoulders of the most eminent apostle of short-story writing, Dean M. Lyle Spencer, have descended, suffocatingly, the cap and gown of the Presidency of the University of Washington. Candor compels us to add, that President Spencer's rise to eminence was due no less to his leadership of the youthful unfortunates of the State of Washington through the occult mysteries of short-story writing, than to his faithfully sustained administration of the office of Vice-President of the Seattle Chamber of Commerce. President Spencer's career has been aptly expressed in the slogans of the institutions with which he is allied, as follows: "Get the Seattle Spirit;" "Advertise Education;" "Produce Pecuniary Prose."

The University of Oregon can boast of no short-story instructor of the eminent attainments of President M. Lyle Spencer. If Professor W. F. G. Thatcher's record includes a term of service as Vice-President of any Chamber of Commerce, we possess no knowledge of the fact. Professor Thatcher has, nevertheless, certain individual claims to fame. He has been awarded honorable mention in the list of winners in a Chicago tire-naming contest, in which more than two and one-half million names were submitted. Professor Thatcher has offered the fruits of his intellect in other national name and slogan contests, and has won distinction in practically all of them, for the winsomeness and chic of his titles. A movement is reported to be on foot among Professor Thatcher's more devout disciples, to present him with a gift of 250 engraved calling-cards, bearing his name with the legend, neatly engraved in elegant script, "You Can't Go Wrong with a Thatcher Title."

But these are the admirals, so to speak, of the service. To continue the figure, the lower decks offer a spectacle which, in charity, we do not encourage the reader to contemplate. What shall be said of Mme. Mable Holmes Parsons, the illuminatrix of the short-story writing department of the University of Oregon Extension Division? Not for her the Vice-Presidency of the Seattle Chamber of Commerce; not for her parched lips the fragrant moisture of Honorable Mention in a Chicago tire-naming contest. For her, only the enfeebled sighs, the emasculate twitterings, of the vapid ladies, trousered and untrousered, the mental unfortunates who inhabit the unstoried corridors in which her dictum runs as law. Hers only to feed her soul, between intervals pathetically wide, upon the empty honor

of a kiddie poem in the Sunday Supplement of the Portland Journal. Let us not touch her further. There is enough, ay, more than enough, to engage us elsewhere. Scientists inform us, Nature is an excess. In the field of the short-story classes in the Northwest, surely she has outdone herself.

Shall we descend still further into the recesses? We shall encounter the vertiginous galley in which Prof. Borah, of the University of Washington, concocts his flashy and injurious messes, to dazzle the eyes and ossify the intestines of the hapless intellectual paralytics of his short-story classes. What lies further? The stokehold! Formless shapes there labor and conspire, yearning for greater power to lead victims into the path of error. There bend the leaders of the Y.M.C.A. short-story classes. There toil, in groaning discontent, the teachers of short-story writing in the high schools. What lies further? Shall we look further? Dare we look further? In common pity, no! There is a point at which curiosity ends, and perversion begins. We had almost crossed it. Let us turn our faces away.

IV

Until lately, it was difficult—it was impossible—to have formed the faintest conception of the abysmal degradation into which Northwestern letters had fallen. We had noticed that when we announced ourselves as practitioners of literature, people regarded us suspiciously, and treated us with a wariness which impressed us as unnecessary. We could not imagine why. We had not seen the Parliament of Letters in Seattle. It included all the Writers' Clubs, all the Poetry Societies. Now, we have seen it. We have seen it all

We have sat in the gallery of the Parliament of Letters in Seattle, and gazed with dreadful awe upon the tossing sea of puerile and monotonous imbecility raging beneath us. Sterile and barren wave after wave of frustrate insipidity swayed beneath the apostolic trident of their pitiable Neptune, the above-mentioned Col. E. Hofer. As the presiding deity, so were the votaries. What hope that a bright-hued phrase might leap glittering from that desert sea? What hope of any act of reverence for life, for character? What hope of any fruition, except that of selling a plot, conceived in avarice, written in slavish and feeble-witted devotion to the dictates of a porcine mind, squalidly inhabiting the skull of a professor of a short-

story writing class? We faced the appalling truth. This, then, was the image upon which the public had formed its impression of Northwestern writers!

But worse than this had to be faced. How many times had some tired Eastern editor, chained to his desk by the necessity of earning his daily bread, cringed from the gruesome monument of driveling manuscript, overshadowing, like some monstrous fungus, the desk which, perhaps, has felt the glory of the writings of such men as Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, James Branch Cabell, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg—men of whom American literature may be proud? How could we, as Northwestern writers, ever again demand courtesy of these editors? How could we ever again dare to commit our manuscripts to this devastating flood of imbecility? In our innocence, we had done that which the imagination rebelled to contemplate.

V

Our first impulse was to vow abstention from a pursuit which linked us with such posers, parasites, and pismires. Horror at contemplating a spectacle so blasphemous, so mortifying, so licentious, so extravagantly obscene, drove all sense of loyalty, duty and self-sacrifice from our minds. Our own thoughts were washed away in the black flood, and we could only repeat, with the Elizabethian, Webster:

*“Thou hast led me, like a heathen sacrifice,
With music and with fatal yokes of flowers,
To my eternal ruin.”*

But it need not be eternal. It lies with us, and with the young and yet unformed spirits, to cleanse the Augean stables which are poisoning the stream of Northwestern literature at the source. Our Hercules has not yet appeared, but hope is surely not lacking. We have had a vision, and we have gained faith boldly to prophesy his coming. We can yet cry, even in this darkest and most, hopeless hour, from the mountain tops of vision—

*“Yet, Freedom, yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
Streams like a thundercloud against the wind!”*

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