

Book Reviews—Signed or Unsigned?

By BRANDER MATTHEWS

ONE of the most outstanding features of the nineteenth century was the expansion of the periodical press. By 1821 The Edinburgh Review had been followed by The Quarterly, Blackwood's Magazine had begun its career, and The Athenaeum was soon to come into existence, to have as rivals in the course of a score or two of years The Spectator and The Saturday Review. On this side of the western ocean magazines and weeklies sprung up and led a precarious existence. The North American Review followed in the trail blazed by The Edinburgh Review. Harper's Monthly and The Atlantic were founded before 1860, and so was The Independent. The Nation (now The Outlook) came into being between 1860 and 1870, and in the final thirty years of the century a shower of new magazines fell upon the news stands, the more notable being The Century and Scribner's.

Perhaps the most striking contrast between the periodicals of 1821 and the periodicals of 1921 is that the former were absolutely anonymous, whereas the latter are emblazoned with the names of their contributors. It is only comparatively recently that we have been able to distribute the blame for the blackguardly abuse which abounded in Blackwood's and for the less offensive but equally bitter personalities which disfigured The Quarterly. We know now—or at least we think we know—who was responsible for the mean and malignant attacks on Keats and on Charlotte Brontë in one or another of the ponderous quarterlies. As our earliest American periodicals were made on the pattern of the British, they adopted the fashion of anonymity. The first number of The Atlantic had contributions from Emerson, Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell and Mrs. Stowe; but its readers had to guess as best they could about the authorship of the prose or verse which most pleased them. It was not until about 1880 that the signatures of contributors appeared in the pages of Harper's Monthly; and E. C. Stedman once told me that he had refused repeated invitations to write for Harper's because he felt that he could not afford to hide his light under a bushel.

When The Fortnightly Review was started in 1845 by a group of advanced thinkers every article was signed, that the individual writer alone might bear the burden of his more or less unpopular opinions. Those who guided this new venture hoped to establish a review in England worthy of comparison with the Revue des Deux Mondes in France, and the French have never approved of journalistic anonymity. In Parisian newspapers even the editorial articles generally bear the signatures of their several writers. The chief exception to this rule is to be seen in the columns of the ablest and most dignified of Parisian journals, the Temps; but this exception is apparent rather than real, since the names of the contributors are widely known in Paris and their ways of writing are easily recognizable.

It is only in this twentieth century that the newspapers of New York have chosen to declare the authorship of their reviews of books, of plays, of pictures and of music. In some cases this is only a disclosure of what was already known. In the early seventies, for example, everybody knew that George Ripley

was responsible for the book reviewing of The New York Tribune. John R. Thompson for that of The New York Evening Post and William C. Brownell for that of The World. It was an open secret that the literary columns of The Springfield Republican were for years in the sole care of Charles G. Whiting. When Lowell was the editor of The Atlantic, and later when Howells succeeded to that post, there was little difficulty in identifying the book reviews written by one or the other. Even now, a certain proportion of the book reviewing, even in the best of our newspapers, is anonymous; and it is very properly so, the works of salient importance being dealt with by experts whose names are given, while the less significant volumes are briefly considered by a competent office staff.

There is no sign that American newspapers will follow the fashion of the French and append the signature of the writer to their editorial articles. A review of a book or a play is and must be the work of the actual writer, whose duty it is to express his own opinion. But an editorial article, although it may be (and almost always is) the work of one writer, is also the result of the conference of the editorial staff, influenced inevitably (even if unconsciously) by the traditions of the paper by what is known as its policy. Yet of late the signed article has made its appearance even on the editorial pages of some American papers which have retained a former President of the United States as a "contributing editor."

The disappearance of the anonymous review is probably due to the clear perception that reviewing is not (and in fact cannot be) "editorial," strictly speaking; that it ought not to be influenced by the "policy" of the paper; that it must be one man's job, if it is to have any flavor of individuality; that this one man ought to warrant his opinion with his signature. Probably other influences have aided in compelling the abandoning of the traditional anonymity, and one of these

may be akin to the movement in the theatre which has developed the star system and abolished the stock company. The advantages of the signed review of current literature are so many and so obvious that we can only wonder why they were not perceived long ago.

One of these advantages deserves consideration. When book reviewing was anonymous, a reviewer might puff the writings of a friend in half a dozen different periodicals, perhaps in the hope and expectation that this friend would puff his own forthcoming volume. This reciprocity of puffery was prevalent in London twenty or thirty years ago; it was then denounced as "literary log-rolling," and it has not entirely disappeared. Thirty years ago The Nation was the most important critical weekly in the United States and The Saturday Review was the most important critical weekly in Great Britain; and in both of them I have read anonymous reviews of books which had been written by one or another of the editorial staff of the paper wherein the highly eulogistic estimate appeared. As I was then an occasional contributor to both these journals, I knew that their editors were writers of distinction, and I recognized that the reviews of their own books printed in their own papers were not extravagantly over-laudatory. I thought then, and I still think, that Richard Watson Gilder was better advised when he succeeded in keeping any mention of his books out of the pages of the Critic, edited by his brother and his sister.

As anonymous book reviewing may lend itself to logrolling, or even to self-puffery, so also may it cloak unfair attack and personal disparagement. Probably Lockhart would have curbed his brutal instincts if he had had to sign his bitter assaults in Blackwood's on the members of the "Cockney School." Almost certainly Miss Jewsbury—if it was Miss Jewsbury—would have modified her venomous invective against the author of "Jane Eyre" if she had not been namelessly

skulking. It seems to me self-evident that a reviewer who knows that his review will bear his name will be more cautious and more careful in forming his opinions and in expressing them than he would be if his identity was hidden by anonymity. I have written hundreds of book reviews in the past half century, and I can testify that I have put more time and thought and conscience into those which I signed than I did into those which I did not sign.

It was therefore with surprise that I found a plea in behalf of anonymous book reviewing in the preface to the volume of lively and erudite essays in criticism which Paul Elmer More has entitled "With the Wits." In this preface Mr. More informs us that he served for a year or two as editor of a critical weekly in which the book reviews were not signed; he cites two or three instances of the disadvantages of anonymity; and he concluded that "nevertheless, anonymous reviewing is the best," since scholarship and letters are more in danger of suffering from the false praise of logrolling friends and climbing subordinates when reviews are signed than from dishonest backbiting when reviews are anonymous.

Certainly, this conviction is not supported by the two instances Mr. More has cited:

Alas, if only I could appease other resentments by telling how often the hateful review (the more hateful because just) was no product of my gall, not even of a chosen enemy's, but came from some gentle friend of the author, who loved him not the less, but truth the more. I remember once suffering a savage attack from an unflattering historian in the parlor of a common friend for a review supposedly from my pen, but really the handiwork of our host.

The honest reviewer would have diverted the storm to himself had I not restrained him by a gesture. In another case the wife of a brother editor has pursued me relentlessly these ten years for the review of her husband's book, which was written by one of his own favored contributors and the review was fair.

I do not know how this quotation will strike others; but I think that the two examples adduced bear heavily against Mr. More's case and strongly in favor of the signed re-

view. In both instances the reviewers were personal friends of the authors of the books about which they expressed unfavorable opinions; and they did their friends this ill turn not openly but cloaked and hooded. Mr. More vouches for the fairness of the adverse opinions they expressed; but he leaves us to form our adverse opinion of men who loved truth more than friendship and who would take pay for pointing out the defects of their friends' books, while shrouding themselves in the cloak of anonymity. On occasion it may be friendly to tell a friend of his faults in private; but what kind of friendship is that which permits a man to put on a mask and to stand up in the market place to expose to the public this friend's defects? What has the love of truth to do with a dirty trick like this? It is only in a court of law, after taking an oath and under compulsion, that a man is ever justified in uncovering the weakness of his friend. The weakness may exist and he may perceive it, but if he is a gentleman he will leave its proclamation to others.

Let me in turn cite an instance of the evils of the unsigned review. Years ago one of the foremost scholars in the United States published an important study of a great poet. He divided his book into half a dozen topical sections; and in one of these sections he set forth his reasons for believing that this great poet was the writer of a work not generally credited to him. Whether he was right or wrong in this ascription does not now matter; his discussion of this topic took up only a sixth or an eighth of his book. A younger scholar held that this ascription was wrong. He reviewed the book anonymously in a critical weekly, passing briefly over the merits of the work and giving several columns to the demolition of the author's theory, thus conveying to the non-expert readers of his review an impression that the great scholar was sadly at sea. Not content with this, the same man prepared a second article, also anonymous, for a literary monthly, in which he did again what he had already done, with the result that he produced the same damaging effect upon the non-expert reader. Finally he contributed to a technical quarterly a long article (this time bearing his signature), in which he repeated his arguments. Perhaps he believed that he was testifying to the truth as he saw it; but the result was to convey an entirely untruthful impression to any one who chanced to see these three successive articles and who might very well conclude that the book could not amount to much since The Nation and the Atlantic had disparaged it and Professor Blank in the technical quarterly had dissected it relentlessly. Would this misleading effect have been possible if this reader had known that Professor Blank was, "like Cerberus, three single gentlemen in one"?

Perhaps it is unkind, but it is not unfair to remind Mr. More that when he was an editor he signed his own reviews, even if the others were unsigned, and that now he is in charge of the book reviewing in the Unpopular Review all the critical articles are signed.

Some day I may be tempted to tell how it was that the late Charles Francis Adams once reviewed anonymously and savagely a book by his brother, the late Henry Adams.

Diving Tank Behind Jefferson Market Jail



(Idea of Captain Simms of Engine Company No. 18.)