

Baltimore Evening Sun
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Marginal Notes

Does Poe Need A Monument?

The Poe monument propaganda which was launched so fairly a year or so ago is apparently making little progress, for nothing has been heard of it for some time. No large donations, in either cash or commodities, have been reported and the Poe memorial volume, which was to have brought in many a bashful dollar, has been delayed from month to month pending the receipt of enough subscriptions—an extremely modest number, I am informed—to pay for its printing. At the present rate of collection a good many years will have to come and go before enough cash is raised to pay for a respectable monument. And meanwhile the people of Baltimore show no sign of being interested.

I have often wondered why anyone should want to put up a huge (and probably unsightly) shaft in memory of a man so well remembered as Edgar Allan Poe. That Poe was the greatest poet of his time and the greatest fictioneer of all time I have long doubted despite the eloquent arguments of his more vociferous admirers, but that he wrote books which will live and that, in point of fact, they are obviously living today I admit with extreme willingness. Go into any bookstore and you will see long rows of volumes with Poe's name upon them. Go into any public or private library in the United States and you will find if not a complete and elegant "set" of Poe, then at least a copy of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." A good many of us have outgrown Poe as we have outgrown McGuffey's Fifth Reader, but we have all read him at some time or other, and the children born yesterday will also all read him at some time or other. And whoever reads him will remember him forever after—with joy or horror, as the case may be.

The volumes in the bookstore windows and upon a hundred thousand library shelves in America, Europe, Asia, Africa and Oceania constitute all the memorial that Poe needs. It seems absurdly supererogatory, not to say grossly and offensively impertinent to erect a monument to a man so abundantly alive. That same element of patronizing presumption is visible in all schemes to memorialize poets and philosophers in marble. So long as a man's books are read by thousands and the ideas in them color the thought of the whole world, every dog's-eared copy is a tombstone as high as the Matterhorn. And by the same token, once the human race ceases to read a writer's books it is no longer worthwhile to remember him. When his thoughts die, he dies also.

The world seems to sense all of this in a dim sort of way, for it wastes very little money upon monuments to the authors of great books. So long as 200,000,000 Mohammedans spend a part of every day reading the Koran there will be no marble shafts to the son of Abdallah in the parks of Constantinople. Suppose someone were to propose a monument to Moses, to St. Paul, to Homer—how silly it would seem. And as it is with the greater, so it is with the less. If a monument in Carroll Park to William Shakespeare would be an absurdity, then a monument to

Edgar Allan Poe would be an absurdity too, for the fame of the two men differs only quantitatively.

But we must have monuments in our parks! Of course. Let us set up hundreds of them! But let us take good care to dedicate them to men who are apt to be forgotten without them—to obscure benefactors of humanity, to our village Hampdens, to men who have given their lives to us in all humility. Who invented the art of filling decayed teeth? I have never even heard his name. And yet, in all seriousness, it seems to me that he was one of the most useful human beings that ever lived. Let a committee be appointed to unearth him from his obscurity and set up a monument to him. He deserves it, and what is more he needs it.

So, too, with the man who introduced vaccination in Baltimore, the man who first thought of making a park of Druid Hill, the man who invented the deviled crab, the man who designed Mount Vernon Place. These men served us honorably and usefully according to their varying talents—and we have forgotten them. Let us, then, find out their names at once and build monuments to their eternal glory. It is a disgrace to us that we have not done so long since.

But Poe needs no monument. He is his own splendid and undying memorial. The good folk who seek to honor him by erecting a hideous pile of stone in some public park have a great deal more enthusiasm than good taste. One does not offer tips to John D. Rockefeller nor draw up resolutions in praise of the saints.

Uplifting The Drama

A flaming circular announcing the organization of the Drama League of America came to me this morning from Chicago, where the principal members of the new organization seem to live and have their being. A glance over the list of names shows the usual crowd of assiduous uplifters—fussy college professors, stars of the woman's clubs and other such amateurs. So far 63 woman's clubs of Chicago—imagine a city with 63 woman's clubs in it!—have joined the league, and the work of lifting the drama from the morass in which it wallows is already under way.

The circular of the league mentions with approbation the work of the MacDowell Club of New York, an organization which undertakes to furnish all who care to receive it accurate and inside "information" regarding plays presented on Broadway. Whenever a new play is produced the MacDowell Club connoisseurs have a look at it, and next day a secret report is sent to subscribers. Here is a sample report, the play being John Galsworthy's "Strife," which was played here by the New Theatre Company:

General Idea—Modern realistic drama involving the primitive passion of greed leading to the over-reaching that kills.

Characterizations—Present day types of oppressors, rich and poor.

Technique—Masterly.

Plot—Direct and powerful.

Situations—Logically developed and intensely dramatic.

Dialog—Natural, crisp and vital.

Production—Much restraint shown: The scenic effect being subordinated to the human interest.

Acting—Admirable cast, the leading parts well taken. Special praise should be given to Mr. Louis Calvert, Mr. Albert Bruning, Mr. William McVay and Mr. Frederick Gottschalk.

Note—the stage management admirably arranged, and especially noteworthy in the handling of crowds.

The notion of the MacDowell Club uplifters seems to be that puerile “criticisms” of this sort are more trustworthy and informing than the reviews of the newspaper critics. With that view it is useless to quarrel. If there are persons in the world who prefer the vague and empty generalities quoted above to the careful summaries and judgments of the better sort of newspaper critics, let them have what they want, and joy be with them. The general public, it is probable, will continue to trust to the professional reviewers, who whatever their deficiencies otherwise, are at least good reporters. With the uplifters it has little patience. It has long since grown weary of their owlish assumption of superior wisdom, their elaborate and hollow theories and their pharmacopoeia of vapid phrases.

In the case in point the inability of the most accomplished uplifters to understand and describe a play of ideas is well demonstrated. As will be noted, the MacDowell Club report calls “Strife” a drama “involving the primitive passion of greed leading to the overreaching that kills”—which is exactly what it is not. The very purpose of “Strife,” in point of fact, is to show that in conflicts between capital and labor it is usually the thirst for power and not mere greed which moves capitalists and labor leaders alike. Mr. Galsworthy’s capitalist is so little a slave of greed that he is willing to sacrifice his whole fortune and those of his associates to win his battle with the strikers. And the leader of those strikers, far from seeking material advantage in the battle, actually sacrifices his all in the course of it. What he wants is not money, but the feeling that he is a conqueror, that he has fought a powerful enemy to a standstill. And his antagonist is after the same sort of satisfaction.

In other words, the amateur who wrote the MacDowell Club report missed entirely the main point of Mr. Galsworthy’s excellent drama. It was as plain as a pikestaff, and the numbskulls of the newspapers saw it without difficulty, but this brave volunteer, for all his cargo of wisdom, missed it! And yet we are asked to believe that such shallow dilettantes have a mission to “educate” the public and “uplift” the drama. It is to laugh!

(Source: Parks Library Media Center, Iowa State University, Microfilm Collection)