Points of View

"Helen" Once More

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review:*
SIR:

It has been my bad fortune in the past to read a considerable number of would-be authentic historical romances, dealing with various periods of Greek and of Roman history. I can suggest no worse punishment for those who consider Erskine's delightful "Helen of Troy" unforgivable sacrilege than to read under compulsion ten standard novels of the kind I have indicated, beginning with Becker's "Charicles." For sheer fatuity, for Elsie Dinsmore philosophy, for unadulterated pomposity these volumes win the ignoble prize. Yes, the lord be thanked, Erskine has written a novel breathing the spirit of these modern days, free from descriptions of the Homeric shield, the Homeric warrior, the Homeric palace, and what not. If we want that sort of thing we can get it in Seymour's scholarly and interesting volume, "Life in the Homeric Age." Mr. Erskine could not be Homer if he tried; he was content (and we are thankful) to be Mr. Erskine.

After all (Mr. Andrew Lang to the contrary) the Homeric Greeks were human beings. Homer didn't write like a congress of Oxford dons, chanting favorite passages from the "Morte d'Arthur." As an undergraduate once observed, you need Homer to interpret Andrew Lang. Not only were the Homeric Greeks human beings; they talk like human beings. Mr. Powys, who finds the tone of Erskine's conversations too intimate, might do well to read the latter part of the first book of the Iliad or the scene in the eighteenth book of the same epic, where Thetis goes to pay a belated call on Olympus. Needless to say, Homer wrote an artificial dialect, but what bard of any genius could or would exclude from his songs every echo of the living speech? Men did write thus in later days when they tried slavishly to copy Homer; their names are now a scant paragraph in a history of Greek literature. And when would-be accurate authors make Homeric characters talk as Wardour Street automatons they lose the whole secret of Homer's charm. Homer is one of the most intimate of poets. He tells us in the short scope of his poems far more about the daily life of his people than do all the more restrained writers of the Periclean period.

Erskine's worst crime however is not that he has been too intimate, too colloquial, too banal (would that more conversation were banal as that of Erskine), but that he has done outrage to the memory of Helen of Troy, a memory which has been held sacred for three thousand years. I wonder. Homer, it is true, spares Helen. With exquisite tact he makes this most unhappy queen move to and fro on the heights of windy Troy. But even in Homer Helen struggles in vain against Aphrodite. In the third book she comes in spite of her expressed repentance and reluctance to share once more the couch of Paris. And after the death of Hector she declares she has lost her only true friend. All the rest in Troy save only ancient Priam hate her bitterly. Later authors were not slow to say what they thought. Euripides calls Helen a strumpet; he regards her (and so too does Virgil) as a guilty woman on whose head rests the blood of many brave soldiers. Æschylus ordinarily says little about women. But he depicts in matchless lyrics the beauty of Helen, that he may show how cruel was the use to which she put it. To him and to many other Greeks Helen was simply a faithless wife, who caused the shedding of much blood.

Euripides is occasionally almost frivolous when he speaks of Helen. She was a silly little jade, fond of luxury, who fell in love at the first moment with the jewelry and finely-fitting pants of Paris. Even after that terrible lesson at Troy, after that so cruelly prolonged honeymoon, she came home in fear of stoning, yet laden down with Phrygian eunuchs and fans and ointments that she might not forget the Asiatic luxury she had lost. Coluthus is almost as light in his attitude toward La Belle Helène as was Offenbach. (One seems to remember a presentation of that opus in which the warriors sang "On the Banks of the Wabash"). In the pages of another classical author we read the love letters of Paris and Helen, and elsewhere learn of Helen's vain grief when she saw the first signs of approaching old age.

Beauty so divine as that of Helen was not, to state the other side of the case, without defenders even in antiquity. It is curious to find Euripides playing the apologist for Helen. In his play of the same name he represents Helen as having been, not in Troy but in Egypt, during the Trojan War. Old Stesichorus is said to have been responsible for that yarn. Helen blinded this half-mythical lyric poet because in a poem he assailed her character. The bard regained his sight by writing a recantation in which he said that the real Helen waited for Menelaus in Egypt, while the warriors at Troy fought over a phantom. Morever, it was Stesichorus who, quite in the spirit of a famous biblical scene, related how the accusers of Helen captured her at the fall of Troy and took up stones to stone her, but one by one slunk away, conscious not of their sins, but of her beauty. Gladstone, to come a few years nearer, blubbers sentimentally about the "Christian repentance" of Helen. Most amusing of all is Sir John Lubbock, who valiantly endeavors to make Helen an honest woman by explaining her elopement with Paris as a marriage by capture. Unfortunately for Sir John Homer knows nothing of such marriage; Helen already had a husband; and as Herodotus remarks, "If the women had not been willing, they would never have been carried off."

Erskine takes another ground. Instead of writing like a young poet who dashes off a sonnet to Helen without troubling to look inside a dictionary of mythology Erskine studies the myth, then rationalizes it, and finally makes it human. Instead of calling Helen an adultress he thinks of her as a woman of divine beauty and strong will, who elects to follow love where she finds it. Particularly does he emphasize her beauty. Powys and the other detractors of Erskine miss the whole point of Helen's commerce with Eteoneus, Menelaüs, and Telemachus (I was myself rebuked for making that same suggestion about Telemachus in an undergraduate course in Homer a good many years ago.) He tries to show, and in no unsubtle way, that the ordinary male, whether a boatman or a door-keeper or an Homeric king, was so overwhelmed by the personality and the beauty of Helen as to forget resolutions, business, all the common traffic of everyday life. And besides Menelaüs in the Iliad is a vacillating sort of person, who always looks to Agamemnon for a decision, a man with more nerve than courage, a man with greater rashness than wisdom (see Iliad, 10.121.) For this frank statement of the case Erskine has been accused of indecency. If he had only thought to drag in that outworn myth of Aphrodite; if he had only said that Helen's crime was due to the overwhelming power of the love goddess, all would have gone well; had he lugged in Æthra, the mother of Theseur, in order to explain the irregularities of Helen's later life, the *mores* would have been saved and those who yell for decency at the expense of truth would have been satisfied. Why could not Erskine have copied Marlowe, who brought Helen on the stage for the benefit of a stag party, called her up out of Elysium that she might be coveted by an unimaginative conjurer, who talks entertainingly of "fat mutton," and who uses his talents only to set on foot a procession of the seven deadly sins? And it runs in one's mind that a certain tactless German poet actually made Helen the mistress of that conjuring doctor. Reverence indeed!

Erskine nowhere attains the lofty tone of Homer. I turn to my copy of "The Private Life" and read the fine prayer uttered by Menelaus before leaving Egypt or Helen's defence of her life. Perhaps the phrase "with certain flourishes of irritation" jars on sensitive ears; perhaps this is not Homer (who said it was?); but I infinitely prefer it to the yards of archæological pomposity with which one is commonly regaled in novels of this sort, I prefer it to that archaic wooting and wotting all over the premises which is supposed to be Homeric and succeeds in being asinine; in short I prefer Erskine to literary apes.

And Erskine's Helen is suburban. My word! What *would* George Babbitt do with her? Helen was all that Babbitt would not want, someone to make him shin the immaculate picket-fences of Gopher Prairie (or whatever village) and fare forth into the untrammelled wilds of Africa, of which Mr. Powys, staunch defender of reverence, writes with such moving eloquence (see some of the more ebony pages of "Ebony and Ivory"). Once more in reference to the Telemachus episode, which gives such deep offence to defenders of reverence. I had as soon think that the spell of forgetfulness was cast on young Telemachus by a glance from the divine face of Helen as to believe that it was created by a drug, opium or what you will. If Helen could so disturb those old greybeards in Homer, chirping cicado-like at the tower, what could she not do to an untravelled prince like Telemachus?

The whole matter goes deeper than any mere criticism of John Erskine's novel. The general public, I will not say Mr. Powys (for he evidently knows some Greek), has a mistaken conception of the Greek genius. The average prater, the omigawd type of poet who is forever yelling about his soul, the black-cloaked lecturer rolling his eyes as he delivers a peroration on Shelley before the federated clubs of Winesburg, talks of the Greeks as if they had been Duncan dancers, ethereal creatures like Plato's grasshoppers who once were nymphs; gossamer beings clad in the inevitable white garment with a key pattern, leaping from crag to crag of the acroceraunian mountains and batting purple balls from hand to hand; impossible persons who walked about in the market-place shouting: "Nothing too much, nothing too much, nothing too much." This pernicious nonsense pervades the whole of peripatetic talk about Greek literature. Instead of treating the characters in Greek (to mention only one instance) as human beings drawn to an heroic scale, men chatter about classic restraint and Fate and Necessity and the inexorable will of the gods. And no amount of argument will convince the would-be cultured public, reared on false notions of the Greek genius and of those who set it forth in our schools. Men will continue to praise, but not read, the classics until another author comes along who like Erskine has the good sense to see the humanity beneath mythology.

FLOYD A. SPENCER.
Ohio Wesleyan University.

"It Is Me"

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review:*
SIR:

Under Points of View in your issue of August 28th, Mr. George Haines IV quotes Havelock Ellis ("Dance of Life," Ch. 4) in substantiation of his contention of the practicability of the use of *it is me* instead of *it is I*.

Mr. Haines quotes Mr. Ellis as follows: "The French, who in such matters, seem to have possessed a finer social and psychological tact, have realized that *je* cannot be the sole nominative of the first person, and have supplemented it by *moi* (*mi* from *mihi*). The Frenchman, when asked who is there, does not reply 'Je'!

To begin with, Mr. Ellis is philologically inaccurate when he states that *moi* comes from *mihi*. As a matter of fact, *moi* develops quite normally from *me*. Unchecked *e* in Latin regularly diphthongizes into *oi* in French (legem, loi; habere, avoir). That the Frenchman uses *moi* instead of *je* in answer to the question "Qui est là?" is due in no wise to the "finer social and psychological tact" with which Mr. Ellis credits him. The unstressed pronoun form *je* (just as the third person form *il*) could not possibly be used in the stressed position required in the construction under consideration. The stressed position requires *moi* as it does *lui*. Furthermore, *moi*, although coming from the accusative *me*, is as truly a nominative as is the English *I*, inasmuch as it is the Latin accusative which has regularly survived as the French nominative.

It is therefore apparent that linguistic development is most unlikely to succumb to the wiles of social usage in so fundamental a principle as is herein involved.

EDYTHE KELLY SALT.
Pittsburgh, Pa.

In Rebuttal

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review:*
SIR:

I appreciate the interest taken by Mr. Ellis W. Meyers, the executive secretary of the American Booksellers Association, in my article on "Book Distribution Abroad," as shown in his letter published in your issue of November 6. I also appreciate the information he gives about the small Clearing House now existing in New York. But I think he is mistaken in his implied belief that his letter disposes of what he calls my "implied criticism." I asked: Who ever heard of an American publisher going to Europe to study book distribution? Apparently he, at any rate, has never heard of one.

MONTGOMERY BELGION.
New York City.

Reader's Guide

(*Continued from preceding page*)

Watertown, Mass., the Illinois School for the Blind, Jacksonville, Ill. (music only), and the Clovernook Printing House for the Blind, Mount Healthy, O., (books only). Of these by far the most important is the first-named. Price lists from this house and also from the National Institution, London, which issues books in Braille, Grades 1, 2, and 3, and also Braille music, may be had upon application. The cost of these books is high, due chiefly to the space occupied by embossed type; embossed music, however, is very reasonable.

I am often asked to suggest books to be read in Braille, but this is the first time I have been called in to advise in a matter of such weight as the selection of one to be embossed, and the very idea of embossing for the blind as a form of philanthropy seemed so sound to me that I asked for details. It seems that this correspondent's interest in Braille was aroused by an appeal of the Red Cross for volunteers to learn and do transcribing for the blind. She took ten lessons from a Red Cross teacher, and after an examination, received a diploma as a certified transcriber. "My machine, which is on the order of a typewriter, I bought from a firm in Chicago, who make them as a sideline. I submit a list of books which interest me to the Director of Braille work: she informs me which one I may do in order to avoid duplication of hand-made copies. After brailling the book each sheet must be varnished on the back to increase its durability. I then send it to the Red Cross, where a blind proofreader reads it. It is then bound and sent to the Library of Congress, Dept. for the Blind; They send it first to Evergreen Hospital, where there are 500 blinded soldiers, and after they have finished with it it is returned to the Library of Congress, from which it is sent to any place in the United States where it is desired. A device has been lately invented in France whereby about thirty copies can be made from a hand-transcribed work. So far I have only done Conrad's 'Victory,' which made about ten volumes, each over a hundred pages, Edna St. Vincent Millay's 'The Harp Weaver and Other Poems,' John Masefield's 'Salt Water Bal lads,' and the last one I did was 'God's Step-Children.' "

If you can picture to yourself the close attention required to do this work ("which can be done at home and at any odd moments of leisure" says the letter) if you have ever examined a volume of Braille, you will not be unmoved by that word "only" in the sentence beginning "So far." There are some good people you don't ever hear about.

I shall be more than glad of suggestions on the choice of this book. I may say, as we are on this subject, that a novel of surprising power has just appeared, called "Blindness" (Dutton). The author, Henry Green, is very young: I understand he is scarce older than his hero, who while yet a schoolboy halfway through the book loses his sight through accident. The rest of the novel is concerned with his spiritual recovery and adjustment. Whoever this writer may be, he has succeeded in carrying the reader along in the "stream of consciousness of his people in a manner thoroughly modern and without the least fumbling for his effects.

M. D., Atlanta, Ga., asks what dictionary, modestly priced, should be chosen for a class of adults doing continuation work

I went for confirmation of my own belief that the "Collegiate Dictionary," (Merriam, $5) met all these requirements, to the new "A. L. A. Catalogue," just received, a marvellous and monumental work, at least thrice the size of the last issue issue but, thanks to a genius for elimination, not yet too large for convenience in consultation; it can still fit into my brief case for emergency uses while travelling, like the other one. I was pensively turning its pages and wondering why on earth anyone wrote to the Guide with this treasury consultable at public libraries, when I came upon "The Reader's Guide Book," described as "An indispensable work." My family is now required to salaam slightly on entering my presence. I also found in the A. L. A. Catalogue that there is another excellent abridgment of "Webster's New International," smaller than the "Collegiate;" this is "Webster's Secondary School Dictionary" (American Book Co., $2.40), which may fill the needs of this class.

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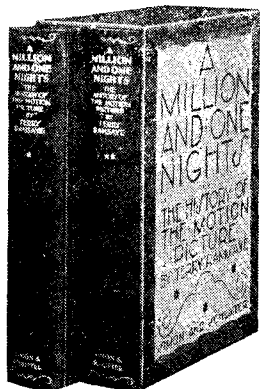

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TWO delightfully illustrated books that have come to us recently are *A. S. Turberville's* illustrated introduction to the eighteenth century, put forth by the Clarendon Press and entitled "English Men and Manners in the Eighteenth Century," and "A Mid-Century Child and Her Books," by *Caroline M. Hewins* (Macmillan). Mr. Turberville considers the illustrations to his own volume fully as important as the letterpress, and they are admirably chosen. The book as a whole is manufactured with the impeccable taste common to Oxford publications. The smaller book, "A Mid-Century Child," bears a lavender binding stamped in gold in delightful imitation of the decorations common to mid-nineteenth century books. The illustrations are culled from such books as "Snow-Berries, A Book for Young Folks, (1867)," "Friendship's Offering (1835)," "The Token (1830)," "Marmaduke Multiply," "Youth's Keepsake," "Grandma's Book of Rhymes for the Nursery," and so on. There are some delightful plates in color and *Anne Carroll Moore* has written an introduction. . . .

Sig Spaeth—or Dr. Spaeth, which title does not do justice to this wit of the musical world,—has just burst upon the market with two books, either of which—if you have any tunefulness in you—should delight you. There is "Words and Music," a book of burlesques (Simon & Schuster) and "Read 'Em and Weep," the Songs You Forgot to Remember (Doubleday, Page). Spaeth, in the former, presents his famous parodies familiar to his lecture audiences and those who have heard him over the radio. But here at last are the words and music you couldn't remember for laughing. "Read 'Em and Weep" is the result of *con amore* research into old songs of sentiment, melodrama, and ribaldry, for the reader as well as for the amateur performer. It plucks priceless pearls of popular vocalization from the past. . . .

We hear that next year Houghton Mifflin will publish a book on old New England tombstones, by *Esther Forbes*, who wrote "O, Genteel Lady." Miss Forbes has spent about twenty years in cemetarial investigation. . . .

The young *Nathalia Crane's* new book of poems, "The Singing Crow" (Albert and Charles Boni), is dedicated to the poet, *Virginia Moore*, author of "Not Poppy." Miss Crane's book is plentifully decorated by *Mac Harshberger*. This thirteen-year-old child poet is a mystery among children. Many of her newer poems seem obscure to us, though often there is unusual insight in the expression, a feeling for words fantastically brilliant. These four verses from "The Dust," for instance, seem to us remarkable:

Under the microscope all seems sincere;
There is a hillside, a valley, a weir.

There are diameters posing as fens,
There are the Apennines—under the lens.

Spread on a slide is the great Gobi Plain;
Carthage and Nineveh rise from a stain.

Laid out in atoms of amber and rust,
Surely an angel arranges the dust.

Again, "Experiments" is extraordinary in compressing a grisly fancy into a quatrain, as well as in its phrasing:

There is a weird for every empty shell,
A hant resides where once the orchid fell;
And in collapsing chancels of the mole,
A shambling ghost still plays his eyeless rôle.

In the title poem and in "A Singer Gone," we do not quite understand about "the daughter of the Hood" among "the lords in black." There is some superb concise phrasing in the former, though the full meaning of the poem is not at all clear. . . .

It is still not too late to get your answer in for the five hundred dollars the firm of Boni and Liveright is offering for an essay on the question (anent *Dreiser's* "An American Tragedy,") "Was Clyde Griffiths guilty of Roberta Alden's death and therefore subject to the penalty of capital punishment for first degree murder?" The judges of this contest are *Arthur Garfield Hays* (who was in charge of the defense at the Scopes trial in Tennessee last year), *Bishop William Montgomery Brown* (Formerly Bishop of Arkansas and excommunicated for heresy last year), and *Heywood Broun*. Manuscripts must be typewritten double space and on one side of the sheet only. They must be submitted, together with all inquiries, to *Donald S. Friede*, 61 West 48th Street, New York City, before December 31, 1926. No manuscripts bearing a postmark later than midnight December 30th will be considered. Boni and Liveright will publish the best of the essays in book form and pay a royalty of fifteen per cent, to be divided equally among all the contestants whose essays are included. . . .

Our own *May Lamberton Becker*, whose address is 126 West 85th Street, announces "Studies in Contemporary Literature: A Series of Lectures," for 1926-27. There are twenty lectures in all, including a review of novels of the season, a study of character in biography, one on the Irish Theatre, one on *Eugene O'Neill*, on the stage in London, a year's British fiction, the bond of Poetry, and so on. Mrs. Becker will suggest reading-lists on any of these subjects through her department in this *Review*, "The Reader's Guide." . . .

Genevieve Taggard, well-known American poet, and author of "For Eager Lovers," "Hawaiian Hilltop," and the most recent "Words for the Chisel" (Knopf), is announced by *William B. Feakins* for a series of lectures with readings from her poems. Miss Taggard is a charming speaker. . . .

The radio station of *The Chicago Daily News*, W. M. A. Q., in collaboration with Northwestern University, is presenting a course of Radio Lectures on "The New Universe," the modern worlds of science, society, art, religion, philosophy, and their relations to each other. They invite all and sundry to tune in every Wednesday at 8:10 P. M. There will be twenty-eight lectures in all. They began on October 20th. Students may register for the course subject to a fee of five dollars charged for handling the papers. . . .

So far as we know, The Society of Woman Geographers is the only woman's organization of the kind in existence. It was organized in 1925, by a group who felt that there should be some medium of contact between women distinguished in geographical work and its allied sciences. Its Associate Membership admits widely travelled women who are interested in furthering all forms of exploration. Among active or corresponding members of the society are such writers as *Mary Austin, Florence Ayscough, Stella Benson, Helen Churchill Candee, Rose Wilder Lane, Jean Mackenzie, Blair Niles, Annie S. Peck*, and *Grace Thompson Seton*. . . .

The "Ivory Tower" tea room, 23 Minetta Lane, Greenwich Village, has just opened. It is a quiet rendezvous for the cultivated, with *Louise Lafitte*, the hostess, and is open at seven P. M. . . .

Bob Linscott of Houghton, Mifflin, and *Conrad Aiken* recently sailed for England. They were to be a week in London and then a week at Conrad's home in Rye. Then Linscott was to go to Paris to visit *Archibald MacLeish*, whose "Streets in the Moon" Houghton Mifflin is just publishing in a limited edition of five hundred copies at five dollars per. Aiken has been here for the last two months working on a novel and an anthology of poetry and a number of reviews. . . .

The Viking Press are arranging to publish next Spring a new story by *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, the author of "Lolly Willowes." Its central character is said to be a South Sea missionary. . . .

Margaret Wilson, author of "The Able McLaughlins," and the more recent "The Painted Room," has been living in England since marrying an Oxford professor. Now she is in this country on a short visit. She will return to England to live in the shadow of the historical old Wormwood Scrubs prison in London, inasmuch as her husband has been appointed Deputy Governor of the prison. . . .

Justin Sturm played full-back and end at Yale and was a star of the Yale-Princeton game in 1921. His name is well-known to sport writers and sport fans. But he has bewildered some of his athletic friends by writing "The Bad Samaritan," a novel lately published by Harpers. . . .

We have received several full versions of the ancient and honorable ballad of Abdullah Bulbul Ameer, since our mention of *Christopher Wren's* mention of it. *B. G. E., Edith S. Mitchell*, of La Grange, Illinois, and *Benjamin P. Bourland*, of Cleveland Heights, Cleveland, Ohio, write us about it. One of these days when we have more space we are going to print the full version with variant readings. . . .

Farewell! (as *Byron* said), a word that must be, and hath been, a sound which makes us linger;—yet—farewell!

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His birth is surrounded by considerable mystery, though his father is known to have been a soldiering Irishman and his mother a Greek.

At 19 he came to America, finally taking up journalistic work in New Orleans. This city fascinated him, and some of his finest early work was done under its spell.

During these years Hearn was continually pressed for money; he was often forced to take menial employment, and to sleep in deserted alleys.

Filled with enthusiasm over the perusal of certain books on Japan, he went to this country under contract with Harpers to write a number of sketches of Japanese life.

Shortly after his arrival, he severed connections with this firm, and became an Instructor of English at the University of Tokio.

He married a Japanese and, after the birth of his son, became a citizen of Japan.

His work was his religion; it obsessed him; it made him both happy and miserable. When forced by circumstances to take up occupations which interfered with it, he became bitterly resentful.

His task was the interpretation of the contrasting civilization of East and West, and to this purpose he made a thorough study of the Japanese language.

His unfortunate temperament made happiness impossible; partial blindness and poverty added to his misfortune.

His writings, full of strangeness and beauty, are proof that a man may rise above ill-fortune through devotion to his art.

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