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The Writer Next Door Mon voisin l'écrivain Mi vecino el escritor



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Jeff McMahon

Heywood Broun: The Writer We Need Now

Coffee rings on the cover testify that my 1935 copy of Heywood Broun's *It Seems to Me* served for some of its life as a coaster. But when I found this collection a decade ago in a second-hand bookshop in California, the genie was still alive in its tawny pages, and he rolled up his sleeves and coached me to better writing. Now I use his writing to coach others. After a class last quarter at the University of Chicago, a promising undergraduate journalist said: 'Thank you for assigning Heywood Broun. I've never read anything like it.'

Like what? Here's Broun (pronounced *broon*) upon the death sentence of Sacco and Vanzetti, the shoemaker and the fish peddler executed by the state of Massachusetts in 1927 on dubious murder charges:

The men in Charlestown prison are shining spirits, and Vanzetti has spoken with an eloquence not known elsewhere within our time. They are too bright, we shield our eyes and kill them. We are the dead, and in us there is not feeling nor imagination nor the terrible torment of lust for justice.

Broun wrote a column for *The New York World*, a more liberal newspaper than anything in today's illiberal media, but the *World* was not liberal enough for him. After *World* editor Ralph Pulitzer spiked Broun's column on Sacco and Vanzetti, Broun published a commentary in *The Nation* calling the *World* cowardly, and was soon without either column or job.

The *World* fired a journalist that the world has never replaced. No columnist today compares in courage, compassion or eloquence. The closest we have may be Nicholas Kristof, who has written on the prison at Guantánamo Bay – which, as an obvious injustice perpetuated against likely innocents by a corrupt government exploiting racism and fear, is the Sacco and Vanzetti of our time. But examine Nicholas Kristof's equivalent lines:

The most famous journalist you may never have heard of is Sami al-Hajj, an Al-Jazeera cameraman who is on a hunger strike to protest abuse during more than six years in a Kafkaesque prison system. Mr. Hajj's fortitude has turned him into a household name in the Arab world, and his story is sowing anger at the authorities holding him without trial. That's us. Mr. Hajj is one of our forgotten prisoners in Guantánamo Bay.

Lovely that Kristof awoke to the cause, but his effort neither burns with passion nor brims with eloquence; it fizzles with journalese – *protest abuse, authorities*

– and cliché – *household name, sowing anger*. I cannot imagine Broun having to make a confession like this one by Kristof: ‘Most Americans, including myself, originally gave President Bush the benefit of the doubt and assumed that the inmates truly were the worst of the worst.’

Nor can I imagine Broun cloaking a confession by generalizing it to ‘most Americans’. Kristof’s excuse: *But all the kids were doing it!* Broun chides all the kids and alters the debate. He not only deplores the condemned men’s offenders, he refocuses their defenders:

Already too much has been made of the personality of [Judge] Webster Thayer. To sympathizers of Sacco & Vanzetti he has seemed a man with a cloven hoof. But in no usual sense of the term is this man a villain. Although probably not a great jurist, he is without doubt as capable and conscientious as the average Massachusetts judge.

Notice the care taken by that middle sentence: *in no usual sense of the term is this man a villain*. It absolves no one of villainy. Broun took the themes for his Sacco and Vanzetti commentary – *death, life, blindness, light* – from an outburst in the courtroom. When Judge Thayer read the sentence, a woman shouted: ‘It is death condemning life!’ So Broun varies his themes with occasion, but regardless of theme he blends compassion and eloquence. Often he sharpens them with wit and humor.

When a Brooklyn parson was crusading against a sex education pamphlet, Broun chased him from the gates of Jerusalem to the walls of Elsinore with a fusillade of punchlines:

Canon William Sheafe Chase is not the first pessimist to insist that nature has tricked us all into a sorry mess and that sex is a fundamental blunder of creation. In that case Hamlet was quite right in urging a nunnery upon Ophelia, but the Canon is almost the first critic to insist that the melancholy Dane was altogether normal.

When not tilting against the windmills of his time, Broun observes its quietest poignancies. In ‘A Spring Sunday’ he sees a young couple kiss in a taxi, and their relationship flashes before his eyes. In ‘Marry in Haste’ he punctures the notion that young couples should go slow and think carefully before slipping on the ring: ‘Marriage must remain among the extra hazardous risks,’ he writes. ‘The best chance is to take a short, sharp sprint before jumping.’ In ‘Marion the Cat’ Broun admires the pluck of a feline companion who, lost for a week, finds her way back to his Manhattan high-rise apartment ... expecting.

She is a nuisance. My impending responsibility for new arrivals fills me with terror, and yet if a cat selects this single apartment out of all New York as just the proper influence for impressionable kittens I must admit that the compliment is greatly received. A cat is nobody’s fool, and if Marion feels that this place has prospects and that I am a promising young author you can’t expect me to set her straight.

The promising young author published *It Seems to Me* at age forty-six. Five years later he was dead of pneumonia. He had time to found the Newspaper Guild, serve as its first president, and publish a few collections of commentary – now out of print – that every columnist ought to read, because Broun would sooner lose his column than lose his grip on justice.

Accused by Pulitzer of expressing 'his personal opinion with the utmost extravagance', Broun replied: 'I spoke only to the limit of my belief and passion. This may be extravagance, but I see no wisdom in saving up indignation for a rainy day. It was already raining. Besides, fighters who pull their punches lose their fights.'

Broun coaches not just fighters, but writers, and we all ought to read him whether we aspire to commentary or poetry or fiction. He sharpened his daggers at the Algonquin with Dorothy Parker. Journalism couldn't keep either of them from writing literature.

I bought my coffee-stained copy of *It Seems to Me* for \$8.50, 'as is'. It previously belonged to a Frank O'Connor, who had splashed his autograph across the inside cover. It could have been any of many Frank O'Connors – probably not the Irish playwright, who lived in Cork and Dublin; more likely the American actor, husband of Ayn Rand. I imagine Frank reading *It Seems to Me* aloud to Ayn in bed at night, charging her thought battery with Broun's compassion and eloquence before she drifts off to dream. But I imagine that scene as *what might have been*. How might Broun have elevated Rand's dry libertarian prose? What if he had served as her coach instead of her coaster?

International PEN

Brownlow House, 50/51 High Holborn, London WC1V 6ER, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7405 0338 Fax: +44 (0) 20 7405 0339

E-mail: info@internationalpen.org.uk Website: www.internationalpen.org.uk

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