

SUPER SCHOOLMASTER

INSTIGATIONS. *By Ezra Pound. 8vo. 388 pages.*
Boni and Liveright. New York.

IT has been observed that Mr Ezra Pound's critical prose is, as a rule, neither prose nor criticism; and this one is willing to admit, in order to save time and because Mr Pound has admitted it himself with embarrassing frankness. ("This essay on James is a dull grind of an affair, a Baedeker of the continent. . . .") There are still several fixed ideas in *Instigations* and a number of repetitions of cadence that have not been attacked. But a brief and belated review is scarcely the place for this sort of thing, nor for the defence of Mr Pound's method, or lack of it, in judging, which I should some time like to undertake.

An important point, however, about Mr Pound's critical writings, which has been generally neglected, is this: they do satisfy two very conspicuous demands of the American public; the demand for "constructive criticism," and the demand for "first rate school teaching."

In his essay on James, Mr Pound makes an academic distinction between prose and poetry.

"Most good prose arises, perhaps, from an instinct of negation; it is the detailed, convincing analysis of something detestable; of something one wants to eliminate. Poetry is the assertion of a positive, that is, of desire . . ."

Well, Mr Pound is a poet. He doesn't write prose; we have admitted that. His destructive remarks are limited to funny oaths and insults; no reasoned attack, no analytic slaughter of the enemy. His time, his energy, he applies to stating, without much fuss, what he finds good, and why.

That people, stupid or not, should demand affirmations and constructive criticism, if only as a novelty, when our young writers are all so busy writing advertisements for a living as to make it impossible for them to praise anything in their off hours, is not

surprising. The odd thing is that people should not take pleasure in affirmations when they are handed them. And yet they decidedly do not. We pretend that it is the destructive activities of the Russians of which we disapprove; we were indeed shocked when they murdered the Czar. But we only became really indignant when they began to improvise a government. Thoroughly popular affirmations, one believes, are always either destructive in intent, like patriotism, or insincere, like advertising. Insincerity of tone is the first lesson for the advertiser to learn. Consider the slogans of the day before yesterday: "All the news that's fit to print." "Make the world safe for Democracy."

All this is intended as an explanation of Mr Pound's failure to impress the multitudes who ask for "constructive criticism." If he would wrap up his prejudices in cosmic tendencies and add a little sensational gossip to his technical discussion, he might put over those very unpopular causes, classical learning and modern literature, to a somewhat larger public. But he agrees too well with that public's avowed belief in the necessity for good school-teaching, to do his work in other than schoolmasterly fashion. Apparently he has in mind a special public, a class of students, almost, to whom he is engaged in delivering this correspondence course of lectures. The idea of this class sustains and encourages him. All through *Instigations* we find him admonishing his students: "Laforgue is an angel with whom our modern poetic Jacob must struggle." "If James *had* read his classics. . . ." and so on. He never doubts for a moment that in order to write permanent work, in order to discriminate between permanent and bad work, a man must know the classics from Homer to Gautier. As fast as he can get round to it Mr Pound is filling up the gaps in the curricula of his misguided but indispensable colleagues, the professors; and at the same time he is carrying forward their work from the point where they always leave off and wait for a literary man to clear the way.

Is nobody aware that a contemporary writer is actually giving a course on the Comparative Literature of the Present, that a first rate literary man, a poet, with the rarest gift for translation is bothering to teach school? Poetry lovers may grieve, but Dr Flexner would do well to take notice.

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