

TEACHING THE YOUNG IDEA TO SHOOT

By Leonard L. Hess

FROM a first year examination paper in one of our largest city high schools: "Write a composition on the following theme—'The heroism of peace is greater than the heroism of war'."

The writer does not recall what arguments the pupils marshaled to prove the above assertion—handed down by superiors at face value as are practically all assertions entering into the educational fabric—but the statement may be ventured that one and all of them supported the doctrine because they realized it was current coinage into the good graces of the examiners. The same statement, issued

noble mindedly to youth in this year 1924, would have been anything but good coinage in the year 1917 or 1918; would, in fact, not have been made by anybody anxious to keep a job under a Board ridden by war psychology, frenziedly eager to expose the slacker and to prove itself a hundred percenter.

But agreed that the heroism of peace is greater than the heroism of war, and taking the words as they fall like jewels from the lips of one of our educators, let us see what our schools do to ingrain such sentiment in the minds of the young. It is hardly necessary to go further than the English literature in the curriculum to gather proof that the virtues extolled are the fighting virtues, the so called "red blood" virtues—in a word, the virtues of our exalted military caste.

I narrow this inquiry to the course of one high school for the sake of convenience, though much of it will be applicable to others. And further, the work of only the first year is considered.

In the first year we find taught Lewis's "Introduction to Literature"—a book with which for itself one does not take issue. But what are the poems and bits of prose chosen for the course? Among others, "Hervé Riel", "The Ballad of the Revenge", "Incident of the French Camp". With these again one does not take issue. They are lively, colorful, adventurous tales. Were they read for story or literary value, well and good. But here steps in that *dêle noire* of our cultural system—the moralist. One must adorn the tale. Each lesson must be sharpened to a moral idea. And what are the highlights chosen in the readings, to be hammered into young skulls? That the heroism of war as exemplified by Hervé, by Grenville, by the drummer boy, is exceeding fine, and if possible—this is the implica-

tion — to be imitated at earliest opportunity. No one takes the trouble to hint that the physical loser may be spiritually right. Force and its victories are lauded.

Another poem comes to mind: "A Private of the Buffs". This brave private dies on a battlefield in India, dreaming of Kentish hopfields. He was a no good, a bum, an inconsequential piece of stuff before the patriotic inspiration sent him to India to knife and shoot natives who rejoiced not under the beneficent tutelage of Victoria. But no sooner did he begin to shoot and knife than he became (the gist of that particular lesson implied) a hero, a pattern of valorous virtue. Not a word was taught, or supposed to be taught, of the utterly false position of England in the Sepoy affair.

Let dusky Indians whine and kneel;
An English lad must die. . . .

Thus sings the English patriot. But had this Private of the Buffs remained still more privately at home and lambasted England for its treacherous and overweening attitude, his saga would not have been written or taught. Taught — that is the crux. Yet, "The heroism of peace is greater than the heroism of war." Yes — until the next imbroglio produces more hundred per-centers, more desperate slackers. Why is not the point made that the Private of the Buffs dashed off in a patriotic frenzy to kill high caste Brahmins because he did not have the brains to stay home and be a successful doctor or lawyer or artist or even politician, and that the one thing his inferior organism could do successfully was to slay superior organisms?

These matters are not pointed out, because "The heroism of peace is greater than the heroism of war." That is logical and clear. Everything

is done — by the people on top more or less consciously and by their henchmen unconsciously or kowtowingly — to put the pupil in such frame of mind that when the next call for volunteers is sent out by the hundred percenters, he will answer:

"No, gentlemen! I cannot respond to your call. For I have been taught that the heroism of peace is greater than the heroism of war. That I believe thoroughly. Therefore I must in all conscience remain at home even though you call me a slacker. I do not wish to be a poor boob like that Private of the Buffs I read about."

Anyone can foresee by the trend of the public school curriculum just such a reaction.

What is stressed in at least one high school in the teaching of the *Odyssey*? Is it an acquaintance with Greek culture or civilization, or that golden beauty which for so many centuries illuminated the world? In fact, the Golden Age came some time after Ulysses' hordes of barbarians were dust. What is stressed is that Ulysses must be upheld as a shining example of the manly virtues, that he is a hero good for a pattern, a fighter, a patriot, a hundred per cent Grecker, with firmly implanted in his breast a desire to aid his fellow bandits and morons, be they right or wrong. Again, one does not take issue with the *Odyssey*, a book of tingling adventure, good for a mood when one likes to visualize a splitting of heads and spattering of brains. One does not take issue with old Homer's heroics. One is glad he smote his bloomin' lyre. But one does take issue with the benign souled and mealy mouthed educators who in the same breath talk of the Hague or League of Nations, scrapping armaments, eternal peace and its heroism, and the to-be-imitated virtues of the sly, crafty,

bloody, lying, sneaking, thieving, boasting, ravaging, murdering, sniveling King of Ithaca.

As a brigand, a betrayer, a moron cracking a few bad jokes, Ulysses is pretty nearly unequaled in history or myth. He set his gang to butcher the Ciconians and to rape their women. He broke the mastoid bone of the beggar Irus — which was like taking candy from an infant — in the spirit of a great joke. He had his serving maids hanged for adultery after he had had a riotous time for a year with Circe and had disported himself for another such period with the nymph Calypso. The only rational thing one

discovers him doing is doubting the virtue of his own wife. Crudely put, he was dead from the neck up.

Yet he is “the greatest example of a man who triumphed by valor and strength”. Triumphed. Ergo — dear pupils — draw your own conclusions and do likewise in like manner. When the next war comes do not stay at home as did Bertrand Russell, Eugene V. Debs, and others, but dash off with your avenging swords and remember Ulysses.

That is the upshot of the psychology that guides the young mind. It is, quite plainly, teaching the young idea to shoot.