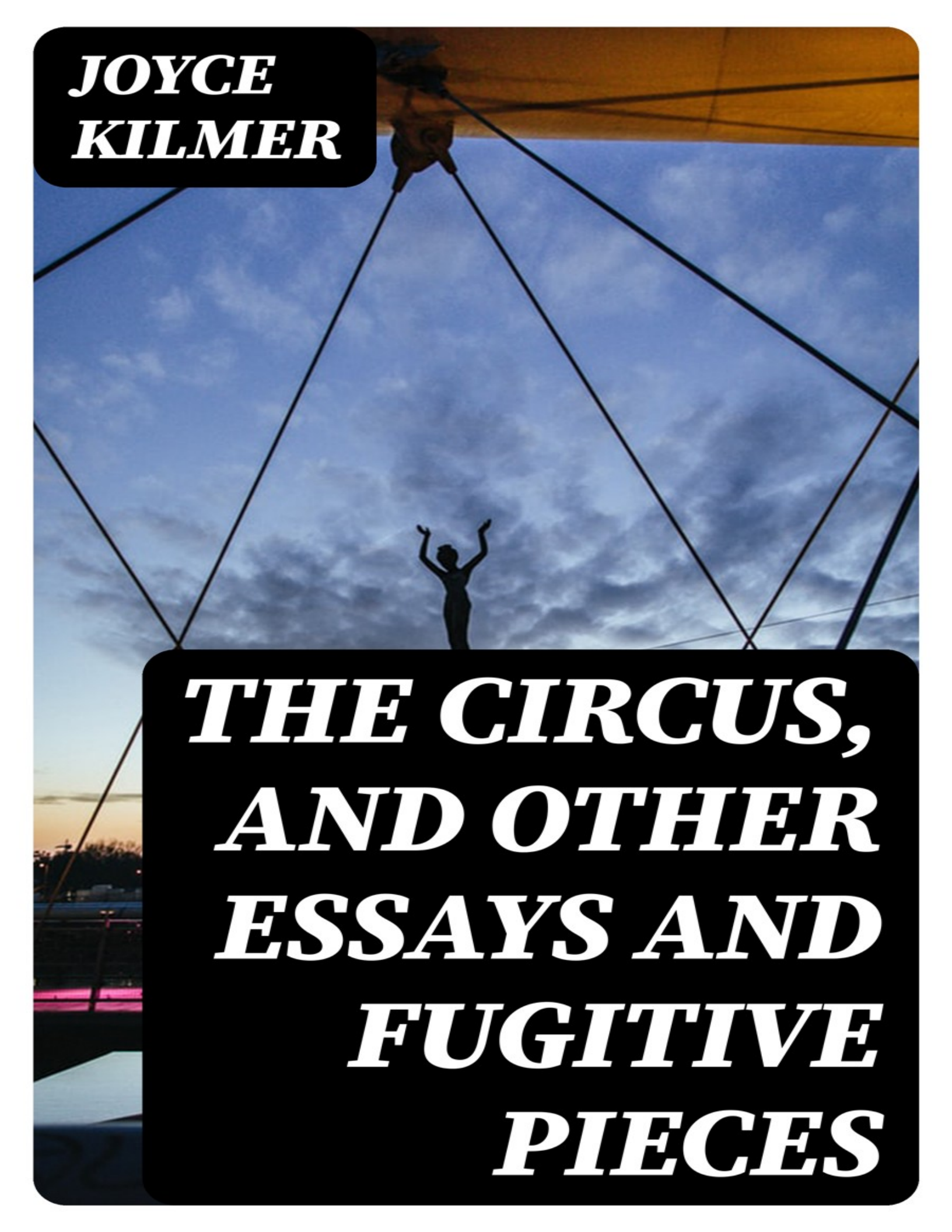




***JOYCE
KILMER***

***THE CIRCUS,
AND OTHER
ESSAYS AND
FUGITIVE
PIECES***

Joyce Kilmer

The Circus, and Other Essays and Fugitive Pieces

EAN 8596547373285

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Titlepage](#)

[Text](#)

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

I

SINCE last I took up my pen in the service of my friend who on July 30, 1918, laid down his sword in the service of his country, fame, and yet greater fame, has been busy with his name. Any further eulogy by my hand would have only the point of being altogether superfluous and the foolish effect of being very much at the rear of the situation. Further, the story of Joyce Kilmer, doubtless in very fair measure, is known to nearly everyone. An account of his career is not to be appreciably elaborated here.

There are, however, some facts in explanation of the appearance of this volume at this time which require to be set down. And a number of circumstances in relation to the material here collected may be told, I think, to general interest. With these matters I am probably as familiar as anyone, and so have the great privilege of undertaking to record them.

The ten highly humorous and altogether charming essays which form the first part of this volume have led a rather queer life so far—though I think their existence will be a very happy one from now on. First, they were not "essays" at the time of their birth. They came into the world as

"articles." So they were spoken of by the young journalist who at various times and with very little to do about the matter wrote them in the course of a bewildering variety of other activities. Or, to be still more frank, he was perhaps more apt to refer to them, when he did refer to them at all, as "Sunday stories," done as a part of his job with the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. What they were called, however, is neither here nor there. The thing is that they are here.

At the time they were offered for book publication their author, then about thirty years of age, was well established as the author of "Trees and Other Poems"—poems which had been appearing for some time in various publications, collected and issued in book form in 1914. He had been for several years a conspicuous figure and an invaluable worker in the Poetry Society of America and the Dickens Fellowship. He was a member of the Authors Club, and several other organizations. He had been a lexicographer and an associate magazine editor. He was a "star" book reviewer, conducted the Poetry Department of *The Literary Digest*, associated much with literary celebrities, and appeared in *Who's Who*. The point I am getting at is that he had a good deal of what is called a "name."

Satan finds mischief for idle hands to do. I suppose that is why the thought occurred to Joyce to get out a book of prose. So, as the professional literary term has it, he "pasted up" ten of his articles—that is, cut them out of the newspaper and stuck them column width down the middle of sheets of "copy" paper. He typed a title page, "The Circus and Other Essays," and submitted his manuscript to a publisher. It was promptly "turned down." Joyce again did up his manuscript, gummed on some fresh stamps, and again away it went to another leading publishing house. And—well, and so on. I do not know precisely how many times this

manuscript was submitted for publication; but I know it was a number, a good number, of times.

That, however, "The Circus" seemed likely not to find any publisher at all at that time is not a matter for anything like astonishment. Not when one bears in mind a publishing hobgoblin of the day. The book was labeled "essays" and therefore damned. And here, perhaps, it may not be too irrelevant to take a brief glance at the whole history of this mysterious thing, the light, familiar essay in English. In the Augustan age of English prose, we remember, appeared the easy, graceful style of Steele and Addison, so admirably suited to the pleasant narrative form of essay which they introduced. And in the nineteenth century in England, when Johnson and Goldsmith were followed by Lamb, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Leigh Hunt, Macaulay, Carlyle, Ruskin and all the rest, the essay certainly appears to have been, so to say, very much the go.

Irving, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Lowell, Holmes—certainly our fathers were not afraid of essays. Nevertheless, somewhere about the opening of our own day an iron-bound tradition became erected in the publishing business, at least in the United States, that books of essays would not sell; could not be made to sell even sufficiently to avoid a considerable loss on the investment of manufacture; in fact, were quite impossible as a publishing venture. No matter how much a publisher himself, or his manuscript reader, might enjoy a collection of essays that chanced to turn up in his shop, his conviction as to its unmarketability as a book was not altered—not even stirred. A few, a very few, essayists there were, indeed, who got published. Agnes Repplier and Samuel McChord Crothers most prominent, perhaps, among them. But these writers had somehow got established as essayists. They were found on the lists only of a house with peculiarly "literary" traditions, which it was

business policy to capitalize and perpetuate for the sake of the firm's "imprint." I have heard scoffers among publishers ask if "anybody outside of New England" bought the books of these writers. Maybe their prime function was, in the publishing term, to "dress the list." The volumes of essays by Dr. Henry van Dyke, I know from experience as a bookseller, sold in popular measure. And now and then a volume of collected papers by, say, Meredith Nicholson would bob up for a short space of time. But such instances as these did not affect the general situation.

In general, when the manuscript of "The Circus" was "going the rounds" it was (supposedly) economic madness, at any rate professional heresy, not to regard books of essays as what the trade terms "plugs," and a drug on the market. Doubtless, the publishing position in this matter was evolved from cumulative facts of experience in the past. But a screw was loose somewhere. The publishing barometer had, it would seem, failed to note a change in the weather of the public mind.

That "The Circus" would not have made a fairly popular book at the time it was first submitted for publication, it seems to me, there is a good deal of reason to believe was a fallacy. Not a couple of years afterward a collection of random articles in general character not dissimilar to "The Circus," by another young man of greatly likable nature, but then practically unknown outside the circle of his personal friends, was in some idiosyncratic moment accepted, and directly won its way to a very considerable sale and a very fair degree of fame. About then, too, along came another book of pasted-up "papers" (about which I happen to know a good deal), which after having been rejected by nearly every publishing house in America was taken in a spirit of generous friendliness by a publisher of much enterprise, began almost at once to sell as well as a fairly successful

novel, has been numerous times reprinted, and in the way of luck brought its altogether obscure author something of a name. And just now the light, personal, journalistic-literary essay is having quite a brisk vogue.

If Joyce stood to-day merely where he stood five years ago "The Circus," without doubt, would be snapped up by anybody. More; some publisher's "scout" very likely would get a "hunch" about the probability of Joyce's having sufficient material in his scrap-book for such a volume and "go after" it even before Joyce had submitted it to the house of this fellow's connection. But, alas! for "ifs" and "might have beens." Fair fortune did not attend "The Circus."

Failing of placing the book with any large house having an extensive and organized machinery for carrying it to a wide audience, Joyce welcomed the opportunity of having the book published by his friend Laurence J. Gomme. Mr. Gomme had been for several years the proprietor of the Little Book Shop Around the Corner, at number two East Twenty-ninth Street, directly across the street from the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration, so altogether charming in its Old World effect, nestling in a tiny green spot hemmed in by high buildings, and known to fame and legend as the Little Church Around the Corner. This was a shop conducted in excellent taste, a sort of salon for pleasant persons of literary breeding, and its "circulars" were written by no less an advertising man than Richard Le Gallienne. In addition to selling the best books of other publishers, Mr. Gomme (at a good deal of risk to himself) served the cause of good literature by himself issuing now and then a volume of a nature close to his heart.

In the autumn of 1916 he published, in a very attractive form, the American edition of Mr. Belloc's poems. The volume was entitled "Verses," by Hilaire Belloc. The introduction to the book by Kilmer was reprinted in the two

volume set, "Joyce Kilmer: Poems, Essays and Letters," under the title "The Poetry of Hilaire Belloc." That same fall Mr. Gomme published "The Circus and Other Essays." He made a charming little book: a thin volume in size betwixt and between what the book trade calls a "16mo" volume and a duodecimo; bound in plain tan boards, with olive cloth back stamped in gold; very neatly printed on soft cream paper in rather small type. The book had a rather fantastically amusing and somewhat lurid "jacket," picturing in black and yellow the professional activities of several clowns.

A very pleasant bibelot, but, I felt then, not a volume effective in catching the popular trade. For one thing, it looked very much like it might be a book of verse. Also, the book was so thin that one would not be likely to catch sight of it standing among other volumes in a row on a bookstore shelf.

Mr. Gomme's means as a publisher at that time did not permit him to give the book any paid advertising; it had no campaign whatever of free publicity behind it. Nor had the publisher any traveling salesmen to show the book to dealers over the country. He merely "covered" New York City himself in the interests of the volumes he issued. Indeed, one would not be making a hilarious exaggeration in saying that "The Circus" was semi-"privately printed."

A fair number of copies of the book were sent out for review. And here is a very interesting thing. The book, as has been said, was decidedly insignificant in bulk. It was published at a time when the assumption prevailed that there was no appreciable public for volumes of essays; and consequently, the inference would be, the publication of such a book was quite without news value. Further, it was issued at a period when newsprint paper was appallingly scarce, newspaper space rigorously conserved, and the war engrossing public

attention. There was, too, as we have seen, nothing about the launching of "The Circus" to tempt any literary editor or reviewer to believe that the book was of any consequence whatever. Indeed, half a "stick" of fairly favorable comment here and there would have been all that anybody could reasonably have expected in the way of a "press." But, as a matter of fact, all in all the book got a surprising amount of space in the papers, and was awarded the dignity of thoughtful appreciation. The *New York Evening Post* devoted half the front page of its book review section to an article, which was continued through a column of another page, to "The Circus" and another book of essays with which it was grouped.

Shortly after the publication of "The Circus" the difficulties of the business of bookselling and publishing at this time forced Mr. Gomme to close out his business. And for a period his affairs were very much involved. His stock in hand was scattered, and before long his recent publications became exceedingly difficult to obtain. A couple of years after the date of its imprint, Mr. Belloc, in the course of correspondence which I had with him mainly relating to other matters, repeatedly besought me to obtain for him a copy of his "Verses," the volume containing Kilmer's introduction. Indeed, he was apparently much put out by the fact that, as he expressed it, he had never even seen a copy of the American edition of his poems. I had more than a little difficulty in finding a copy to send to him. This he never received. With some petulance he laid its loss to the German submarines, which he declared sank everything that was being sent to him. I found the trail to another copy of "Verses" still more elusive; and, to tell the truth, I really don't know whether or not I got another copy off to him. This story is to show that anyone who has a copy of that book now has a volume far from readily found.

Copies of the original edition of "The Circus" are somewhat easier to lay hold of. Doubtless, though, they will soon be scarce, as the original edition could not have been large. And the book will not be reprinted in its first form. With all the untoward circumstances of its publication, however, "The Circus" did seem to find its way to no mean circle of friends. When the memorial volumes, "Joyce Kilmer: Poems, Essays and Letters," were published in the autumn of 1918, numerous inquiries were received by the publishers as to why the essays which comprised the volume "The Circus" were not included. The explanation is this: In the continuance of the entanglement of the affairs of Mr. Gomme's former business no clear title to the rights of this book was at that time in sight. Since then these matters have all been straightened out, and, I am happy to be able to say, this excellent friend of Joyce Kilmer is again in circumstances more auspicious than before, and with joy to his fine heart, effectively serving the cause of good books.

In direct critical appreciation of these ten essays there is not much that I care to say. They were written by my friend, and are therefore holy. That is, of course, to me. They may be charged with being very youthful. Aye; even so.

For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting and for ever young.

Their youthfulness is to me a thing of very poignant, tender beauty. I see again that radiant boy, trailing clouds of glory come from God who was his home. His childhood spent in "a town less than a hundred miles from New York," "now he feels himself actually a New Yorker," "enjoys the proud novelty of working for wages," and "joyfully, therefore, he goes forth every noon to explore the territory of his new possession." The subway was to him "the great nickel

adventure"; a ride on the elevated railroad, "aërial journeying"; his alarm clock, "the urban chanticleer." Again, as a commuter, I see him on the 5.24, flying across "leagues" to his cottage in the "primeval forest" of New Jersey. On his "red velvet chair" he sits, "enjoying with his neighbors tobacco smoke, rapid travel, and the news of the world." None ever enjoyed these things more, red velvet chair and all!

The connection which I may boast of having with the writing of some of these essays illustrates in an amusing way the pleasantly pugnacious character of Joyce's mind. Joyce held that I was offensively æsthetic in regarding sign-boards about the countryside as ugly things. "Signs and Symbols" was his hilarious and scornful rebuke. "The Gentle Art of Christmas Giving" (a *New York Times* article reprinted in the two-volume set) had a similar origin. You remember with what amusing gusto it begins:

If a dentist stuck a bit of holly in his cap and went through the streets on Christmas morning, his buzzing drill over his shoulder and his forceps in his hand, stopping at the houses of his friends to give their jaws free treatment, meanwhile trolling out lusty Yuletide staves—if he were to do this, I say, it would be said of him, among other things, that he was celebrating Christmas in a highly original manner. Undoubtedly there would be many other adjectives applied to his manner of generosity—adjectives applied, for instance, by the children whom, around their gayly festooned tree, he surprised with his gift of expert treatment. But the adjective most generally used (not perhaps in adulation) would be "original." And the use of this adjective would be utterly wrong.

The holly-bedecked dentist would not be acting in the original manner. He would be following the suggestion of his own philanthropic heart. He would be acting in accordance with tradition, a particularly annoying tradition, the evil and absurd superstition that a gift should be representative of the giver rather than of the recipient.

That "particularly annoying tradition," that "evil and absurd superstition," I had been guilty of voicing a few days before he wrote this article. He looked at me with withering commiseration.

If, in the days when he was writing the essays of "The Circus," Joyce had the effect of being ridiculously young, he was also (with affection I say it) ridiculously wise for his years. I can hear the sturdy sound of his voice in the phrase (in the essay "The Abolition of Poets"), "those ridiculous young people who call themselves Imagists and Vorticists and similar queer names." And what joyous satire here:

And there is Zipp, the What-is-it? most venerable of freaks, whose browless tufted head and amazing figure have entertained his visitors since Phineas Taylor Barnum engaged him to ornament his museum on Ann Street. For all I know, Zipp is a poet—his smile is lyrical, and in his roving eyes there is a suggestion of vers libre.

Then, with the mellow humor of paternal experience he discusses (in "The Day After Christmas") that hypothetical person who is three, and who, he regrets to say, is "somewhat sticky"; who, further, had in all confidence requested Santa Claus to bring him a large live baboon, but who had been brought instead a small tin monkey on a stick. Or, again, babies who at somewhere between six and

eight in the morning, "seeing that their weary parents are leaving them, decide at last that it is time to go to sleep."

And even then, as throughout his later years, he had that (manly not sentimental) intuitive sympathy for those by fortune afflicted. In "The Circus":

The freaks get large salaries (they seem large to poets), and they are carefully tended, for they are delicate. See, here is a man who lives although his back is broken. There is a crowd around him; how interested they are! Would they be as interested in a poet who lived although his heart was broken? Probably not. But then, there are not many freaks.

Nor did his perception of sorrow come to him solely by intuition. Far from it. No, this very valiant and very young man himself had experienced the fact that an alarm clock "can utter harsh and strident grief, those know who lie down with Sorrow and must awaken with her."

To me there is something indescribably touching even in Joyce's most hilarious flights of fancy in these essays. I cannot tell you why this is so. Perhaps it is because his jocund humor, like all else, sprang from a heart so woven of the common strands of humanity.

When Adam watched with pleased astonishment an agile monkey leap among the branches of an Eden tree, and laughed at the foolish face of a giraffe, he saw a circus. Delightedly now would he sit upon a rickety chair beneath a canvas roof, smell the romantic aroma of elephant and trampled grass, and look at wonders.

The most obvious thing, of course, about these essays is their Chestertonian spirit and manner. In the matter of the

manner, Mr. Chesterton's trick of "reverse English," to employ the billiard player's term, take this:

It would be the mere prose of our daily life for birds to fly about close to the tent's roof, and for men and women to ring bells and sit in rocking chairs. It is the poetry of the circus that men and women fly about close to the tent's roof, and birds ring bells and sit in rocking chairs.

Or, for both manner and spirit, this:

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down. By faith the Eight Algerian Aërial Equilibrists stayed up.

Indeed, the whole fundamental temper of the book—its glorification (almost deification) of everyday things; its militant persistence in running counter to dull acceptance of current ideas; its sleight-of-hand dexterity in bringing a thing to life by standing it on its head—is Chestertonian. And right there is the point. Anybody, almost, can copy, or parody, Mr. Chesterton's manner. But Kilmer's Chestertonism was nothing of a superficial imitation. He was at heart quite Chestertonian himself. What is still more to the point: He was, so to put it, more Chestertonian than even Mr. Chesterton. That is, one cannot but feel that for some considerable time Mr. Chesterton has been more or less mechanically imitating himself. But Kilmer's rollicking pages have on them the tender bloom of the natural fruit.

And they reek with the articles of his creed—are punctuated with the touchstones by which he guided his life. Three words are most often repeated in these essays. They occur again and again, one or more of them on nearly every page. These words, you cannot fail to note, are: faith, mirth, and democracy.

II

The poem, "The Ashman," which opens the second part of this book, was not included in the collected set of Kilmer's poems, essays and letters for the reason that it was overlooked at the time those volumes were being prepared for publication. The poem was supplied for this volume by Charles Wharton Stork, in whose magazine, "Contemporary Verse," it originally appeared.

Among Kilmer's papers I have found a typewritten memorandum which shows that he contemplated collecting into a volume the fugitive pieces here reprinted. This is the memorandum:

LITERARY ADVENTURES

- (1) Absinthe at The Cheshire Cheese; a consideration of Ernest Dowson and his times. (America pasted up—*Times* Book Review to be obtained)
- (2) Japanese Lacquer; an attempt to solve the Lafcadio Hearn riddle (pasted up)
- (3) SAPPHO REDIVIVA (pasted up)
- (4) RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND THE NEO-MYSTICS (pasted up)
- (5) THE BEAR THAT WALKS LIKE A MAN; Some aspects of the Russian novel fad (pasted up)
- (6) FRANCIS THOMPSON (pasted up)
- (7)

I do not know that anything especial need be said concerning these articles. They are exceedingly lively bits of journalistic literary criticism, highly entertaining in their

exhibition of Kilmer's pet aversions, which, after all, sprang from his manly common sense. In a letter written at about the time of these articles Joyce says: "My chief pleasure in writing is to attempt to expose the absurdity of very modern writers—materialists, feminists, Zolaists and all the rest of the foolish crew."

As interesting examples of Kilmerana, several representative lectures conclude this book. At the time Joyce entered the army his lecturing activities had become pretty extensive. He makes frequent reference to his lecture work in his correspondence of the time. In a letter written in September, 1915, he says, "I can't make a spring tour—because in February or March we're going to have another baby, I'm glad to say." Further on in this same communication, to the Reverend James J. Daly, S. J., he writes: "You see, I don't want to go into lecturing on so extensive a scale as Dr. Walsh. I have my regular work to attend to, and I'd rather not take more than three weeks off at a time. And I don't want to lecture too often. I have not Dr. Walsh's readiness. I prepare my lectures carefully, writing them out like essays, and memorizing them so thoroughly that they give, I believe, the impression that they are spoken ex-tempore." In another letter of about this time he speaks of his "new profession"—"monologue artist in one night stands." In one letter he speaks of a lecture, manuscript of which I have been unable to find, as follows:

The lecture which I especially desire to give at Campion this year is "The Poet of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Their Successors." This is, I think, a better lecture than "Swinburne and Francis Thompson." It is an attempt to show how Patmore (who was a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a friend of Rossetti and a contributor to *The Germ*) carried the theories of the Pre-Raphaelites to their logical conclusion, that Rossetti and Christina and Morris

and a lot of that bunch really paved the way for Francis Thompson and Alice Meynell and Katherine Tynan and other modern Catholic poets, by writing sympathetically, even if not always understandingly, on Catholic themes. Incidentally, I trace "The Hound of Heaven" back through "The Blessed Damozel" to "The Raven." But if you don't want that lecture I'll lecture on any other subject you may elect—the lighter lyrics of James J. Daly, for example.

In another letter he writes: "Next year I won't lecture at all; I'll just recite my poems, which take better than the lectures, anyway. I'm going on tour with Ellis Parker Butler, the 'Pigs Is Pigs' man, and we'll have a regular manager."

And again:

I am glad that you are so forgiving as to be willing to have me at Campion on the twenty-sixth. Unless I am commanded to the contrary, I will give "The War and the Poets" at the College and "Francis Thompson" at the Convent. "The War and the Poets" does not get the goats of hyphenates of any sort—I gave it in Toronto and in Notre Dame. Also I will read some of my own stuff, new and old, at both of these lectures unless forcibly prevented.

The two lectures on poetry, "The Ballad" and "The Sonnet," were given at New York University, and were to have been parts of a book on the art of versification, which the University, I believe, was to publish. In the manuscript of these lectures we find such phrases as "this book," and Joyce referring to himself here as "the author of a textbook." The lecture "The Ballad" as here printed is incomplete, as the typewritten copy of the manuscript which came into my hands, and which is the only copy I know to be in existence, ends thus:

I will call the reader's attention to the work of some of the poets who, in our time, have been proving the falsity of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's statement that

These lectures on poetry are admirably adapted to their end. They are addressed to the student, especially "the apprentices of the craft of verse making." They are devoted altogether to historical and technical matters. And in the earnestness of his conception of his task here as the author of a textbook, Joyce has very rigorously excluded anything which could possibly be fancied as flippant. Just as sternly has he refrained from allowing to enter his discourse any particle of color of religious bias. He has not, however, in the slightest permitted his independence of judgment to be subdued in his interpretation of purely literary points. So these lectures do not lack for vitality, and exhibit again, in a less known manner of his writing, his exceptional clarity of style.

As in his life, so in his writings. Joyce moved in many circles, and though always quite himself, so did he, too, always fit where he found himself. An exceedingly active professional writer, he was called upon to write for various audiences. When he was entrusted with writing the articles on Madison Cawein, Francis Thompson, John Masefield, and William Vaughn Moody for "Warner's Library of the World's Best Literature," and when he was invited to contribute the introductory essay to Thomas Hardy's novel "The Mayor of Casterbridge" in "The Modern Library," he was to address a more or less popular audience of general character, and he did that with ability and distinguished literary tact.

Naturally, Joyce became much in demand as a speaker before purely Catholic audiences. And naturally before Roman Catholic schools, colleges, universities and societies he loosed the spirit of his own fervent Catholicism. Perhaps

it will occur to some readers of this volume who may not be Catholics that such lectures as "Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dawson, Aubrey Beardsley" and "Swinburne and Francis Thompson" are more in the nature of briefs for the Catholic Faith than they are of the character of disinterested literary criticism. I do not think it would have worried Joyce to have been told so. He was in such lectures talking what was to him far more than literature. In a letter of his before me, written by hand, he says, "There are in the universe only two ecstasies. One is receiving Holy Communion." The other, he means, is his love for his wife. "Poetry," he continues, "is not an ecstasy, but it is a delight, a shadow and an echo of the two ecstasies. It certainly is a delight to read and to make."

What, to his mind, was the use of writers, anyway? In the lecture "Philosophical Tendencies in English Literature" he tells very definitely his conviction as to this:

So writers may fulfill the purpose for which they were made by writing—may know God better by writing about Him, increase their love of Him by expressing it in beautiful words, serve Him in this world by means of their best talent, and because of this service and His mercy be happy with Him forever in Heaven.

III

Numerous letters written by Joyce to many of his friends, and kindly loaned by their owners to the publishers, were received too late for inclusion in the two-volume set of his poems, essays and letters. These letters continue in greater detail, and give the emphasis of cumulative effect, to the portrait of a beautiful and a joyous young manhood revealed