Pen & Brush - May 24, 1934

No announcement ~~has been~~ made by any one of the groups running this Club has cheered me more than that of the Writers' Section in the last Bulletin, namely that in the Fall you would begin a monthly meeting devoted entirely to the study of technique. Technique concerns itself, as I suppose we all agree, in performance. We all agree I take it, too, that the technique may be perfect and yet the person not an artist. Also that a person may be an artist and/if his technique is bad not be able to express what is in his mind or in his soul. It is a fine undertaking and I shall be most interested in watching the way you carry on.

But it is not about technique that I want to talk. I generally fill in the time-this closing day-by detailing something that has been much on my mind in the recent months and something that seems to me to relate to the business of writing. Now the thing that has been on my mind in recent months/considerably has been the mind itself, that organ which you must depend upon to handle technique. Do not expect from me any scientific treatment of the subject nor long technical words, but rather a most informal, entirely empirical talk.

My observation is that frequently an attempt by an amateur like myself in ~~a science~~/is to use the nomenclature of science usually results in loses all sight of real meaning.

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the ability to use new words. What I want to do is to report to you certain observations I have been making upon the action of my own mind and the attempt to classify my observations. For some reason or other I began to say to myself a couple of years ago that if the proper thing for us to do as the sponsor of Amos and Andy declares "See your dentist twice a year" I and must admit as my doctor ordered me to submit to an annual physicial examination, why was it not essential? ~~What is~~ more essential to submit to an annual mental examination? I have been using my mind in a way pretty diligently for a good many years and I have thought very little about its processes. Sometimes a thing worked well and sometimes it didn't. And so I began quite independently of William James, who has always been my chief authority on psychology, to take a look at my mind, that is at my conscious mind - the one I use every day, to see how it looked to me, what its structure was and then to see how I was using that structure.

The longer I examined my mind and now and then attempted to visualize my mind I came out with something very much like a layer cake, the top layer I felt quite sure about. That was the one I seemed to be best acquainted with, the active on the job organ, the one I am using now, the one which we use to direct our daily life and out of which we get the things we put on paper that we call writing.

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The more I watched this upper layer the more conscious I was that beneath it there lay a fairly active second layer that was always working through and offering solicited and unsolicited contributions to what was going on above. Now I am not speaking of what we call the sub-conscious mind. I am speaking of a conscious sub-layer - ~~thexfirstxmindxxx~~ a layer below the one that you are using which insists on being heard.

As I reviewed my experience in using the upper layer I was conscious of how constantly that under layer had always broken through. I think my most concrete and illustrations have come from my experience in lecturing. which at one time was a fairly regular part of my professional activities. I spoke without notes which meant that I must hold myself closely to the line of my argument, my mind must know what it was about. But I never stood before an audience that it did not break through this secondary layer of my mind I am talking about all sorts of comments. It would pop up with the observation that there was a man over there that didn't believe a word I was saying or that there was a woman on the other side that had a lovely hat; there was a man on the first row that meant to come to me after I was through

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and ask me what I thought of the single tax or that there was a man and a woman that I wish I might talk with and find out what they do think about these things, what they could tell me about their town. I do not call this the sub-conscious mind, it was the layer of my conscious mind at work. It is always at work; it is at work here now. Sometimes I have had experiences of its intruding and expressing itself outloud in a lecture, some of them very amusing if I had time to tell you. Then below this layer unconscious of something else going on which you can call the brooding mind, something that defies itself, quite continuously though verbally with whatever the subject which was uppermost in my mind at a particular period. It was related to this upper crust, related to what we call the sub-conscious mind - a dimly conscious mind which carries on through thick and thin in whatever, as I say, is uppermost.

That is the way, as I think of my mind, I set it up - a layer cake, active on top, busy and impertinent and interfering just below and at the bottom something that went on thinking vaguely. Now this is something like the structure that an adult who uses his mind comes out with I am convinced. This is his equipment. This is what he gets after discipline and training.

Consider what you begin with, your mind as you begin with it, know that it is not a layer cake, but an organ which dotes on two subjects. This is what we should expect

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is so remarkable an organ let loose in this amazing world for every moment something new and curious attracts it. And as we grow older and become more knowing and interesting it turns us now this way, now that way, now the other way. We have that divine quality of curiosity, that desire to understand and know, and see and we have with it the knack of discrimination and choice which belongs to the untrained mind or of liking it all. It is apt to run in a dozen directions, cease to want to, with the result we dash here, dash there and dash any other place, seem to know everything.

I remember talking once with Henry Van Loon about the choice of selection, and he told me that when he was a student, a boy in Holland where he was born that he determined to perfect himself in all the arts, be a muscian - he is a good amateur - to be an artist. If you know his works you know his captivating illustrations I think he paints, but I do not remember of ever seeing anything of his. He would build houses, write literature - great literature of all kinds. At the moment I had the talk with him he was Professor of History of Antioch College and everything about him in his home showed his interest in all these various arts. He attempted to be an universal genius and at the same time he was making experiments in sociology, a selection of (

But he soon found that out of these arts all of which seemed

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to attract him his mind must make a choice if he was to do anything in a particular field, that is, there was the tragedy - we may call it so I think - of selection, for one who sees something in every great field of human effort. We may call this curiosity of the mind, this jumping from thing to thing that shows itself in the adult person who has taken on certain training, chosen his field, particularly at night.

I know of nothing more wayward than my own mind when I lie awake at night. Of course I could put it to work, I could force it to take up whatever I am busy about. But if I do that I have no chance of sleeping and I need the sleep. Therefore, I say, no, we will not consider iron and steel which happens to be the subject on which I am working at present, we will go to sleep. Being put at work my mind jumps to something that Myla Jo brought up at the supper table the other night - the Russian Lord had turned his Mother over to the authorities when he found her stealing wheat. Seed corn? Should he have had protected her in her crime, for a crime it was. But you needn't think that my mind bothers itself to solve that question. It remembers suddenly that I haven't bought Delphinium plants that I promised to send to the country. No sooner do I think of that than I see a bed of Iris bluer than any bed of Delphiniums I ever saw and that makes me think of my associates and of Evelyn Scott who I had the

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pleasure of meeting and concluded not from anything I had read of hers but just from the look of her face, the fairness of her reactions, the vividness and the breadth of her interest, her unconsciousness, that here is a person. The critics who have been telling us so from her books are right in her case at least. She is a person, this Evelyn Scott, and if she can get that big personality as it develops, and it will develop into the writing than she will have something as they tell me she already has to give us. But there my mind jumps to what - what I would do if somebody would leave me a fortune and then to the sad reflection that I haven't paid my last gas bill and I wonder how my accounts are going to come out at the end of the month.

That is the kind of performances that my mind is capable of at night when I won't let it go to work. Now in an organ which starts out with such vivid curiosity with the ambition to know it all and be it all like Van Loon and which when it is turned loose, even at my age after long experience at hard labor, will cavort like a young colt from one scene to another is guilty of silliness and fantasies which I would be ashamed to tell you. Now how do we get such an organ as that into harness? I have been

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going back to how my mind was trained. You can depend upon it that it was no choice of mine that it was ever trained. I was put to it in school; being put to it I began to learn the pleasure in the solving of problems. I think my first real training came through mathematics. I have always had a high idea of the discipline for a vagabond mind of mathematics. It is purely science, that is, you must solve your problems according to rule-the last thing we like to do. There is no chance for personality in plain or conical geometry or logarithms. You have got to do it according to the law.

With the ability to hold a mind to a problem, to see it worked out, there comes a satisfaction. You are beginning to harness your colt. The value of college training has never seemed to me to be the information, or what we call knowledge we carry away, but it is the ability we get in solving different kinds of problems, of satisfying curiosity, building up that in appreciation, getting a sense of values. So out of college you get the most valuable equipment that the mind can have to start on its career. You have got the beginnings of the discipline which you must have in order to use this upper layer of yours, the ability to put yourself down to a problem and stick to it until it is solved.

I am quite sure that with the most of us the steadiness to which we stick to our work depends upon the interest which helps us through interruptions. depth of

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I was much interested the other day in Mrs. Hall's comment on the handling of interruptions ~~or perhaps I better say the~~ stops ~~that~~ we have to submit to interruptions when we are in the full swing of our labor. What are you going to do about it? Prevent it of course is the first idea, but can you prevent it? Is it always possible? If you don't what are you going to do then? Usually I think we resent it and fuss over it and as a result lose more time than the interruption itself takes. I am convinced the way the mind handles interruptions depends upon the grip we have on the problem we are working on and the absorption in it - the depth of our interest in it. Here if an interruption comes we can handle it almost automatically; we will handle it almost automatically if absorbed in our work.

At the present moment I have a rather difficult historical study on hand. I am deeply interested, we will say, in trying to work out the meanings of the thing. It happened to me the other morning - the telephone rang. It was Club business, very necessary, I must think about it - make an intelligent answer if I could. Before I hardly finished that the ice man came - I think it was the ice man or somebody else. But I went back to my work, took it up exactly where I left it. It had been an automatic handling

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of the interruption. Now I ~~suppose, ck~~ fancy, though I cannot tell, that the difficulty had been taken care of by this sub-layer in my mind which I am convinced can be handled, trained, to handle all kinds of things automatically. ~~It is not done unconsciously but it~~ is done with a certain sub-consciousness. ~~It is done by a secondary degree, an underlayer of consciousness.~~ ¶ I have been questioning myself if after all there was not ~~underneath the top layer~~ of the mind ~~which we use~~ a possibility of training the sub-layer, take to/care of all these secondary matters, make it a silent little servant which will respect its superiors situations and aims to save ~~that~~ all the irritations and trouble it can. You must go to the telephone; you must take care of the call, but with the aid of this ~~underlayer,~~ this servant which you have trained to be a servant, go on ~~and~~ just where you were. ¶ There is another matter in this use of the upper layer of the mind and that is the degree of flexibility to which it can be trained. In any profession with which we are concerned there is more than one thing to be done at once, for the conscious mind to be carrying at once. You have done a book and got it off your hands, but it is not done, not off your hands. There are the critics to be taken care of; there is the

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discovery that you might have done better here and there. You think of a book - I do - when it is done as being done but that is not true and the more important the book is the less is it done. It goes on - you must think about it. If you have a novel and you have a chance like Mrs. Paradis to put it into a movie - she has told us about the experiences of a piece of work that must be done when it is to be turned over to the movies. There is the piece of work you are at at the moment, the work you hope to get at some day. All of these must be handled by this active upper crust. It is a great thing to train it to flexibility and wherever there is the Number 1, Number 2, or Number 3 activity of handling the problem, putting it away and taking up another its task. It must your upper crust must know how to stick to / /turn from one to another. Of course we must get all the use we can out of this under layer which I believe can be trained to be a useful servant.

Particularly can this under crust be made to carry problems. If you have finished your active work for the day, laid it aside, but if it is any continued piece of work you must carry it, and that carrying quality is of the greatest value - not a sub-conscious thing. It is keeping the thing with you. Now you may have people about you that may cause complications sometimes. I heard an amusing story the other

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day of a woman who has a family. She is in my judgment a real writer; there is a vast difference you know between writing and being a writer. She is working on certain episodes in connection with the Battle of Waterloo; she had heard a great deal about it in the family. The other morning at breakfast it got the better of her and the family were conscious that something was the matter, that she was not attending to her duties but her discerning husband laughed and said, " Don't mind her, she is Waterlooing." Well, now I think the mind after it has laid aside the regular active work at its desk can go "waterlooing." This is the kind of activity that is a little more definite, a little more continuous in the bottom layer of your conscious mind which I call the brooding mind. I don't know where this brooding mind ends and runs into the unconsious. I don't think anybody can tell, knows. There is a great field, a great psychological field here, that which those who watch themselves see a little more and more perhaps. The great trouble is that because we see a little we think we may see it all and because we get a term like sub-conscious we think we have the whole truth.

We must not worry about what I call the brooding mind, that is the bottom of the conscious mind where it runs into and what we speak of, what I fancy is a really sub-conscious mind. Certainly a process goes on in these under layers, second and third, of vast importance to the upper layer which must do

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the work of getting a thing down, into shape. It is something which is not unlike the kneading of bread. I do not know that you ever saw bread kneaded, some of you must, but to me in my childhood it was always one of the most fascinating things that went on in the kitchen. The big pan, the great lump of white dough, the flour, the bare arms, the strong hands and that kneading and kneading, and kneading that was necessary to make it, what my mother called, light. It came at a time as a symbol to me of the discipline of the training of life. You had to knead this to get it into shape, to make it something wholesome, palatable. So does the mind do with the problems, the subjects we have on hand, like kneading the bread. Though we do not know very much about it. I think we can feel that here is a real power, that we must respect and observe. Above all not to be too sure about. The whole process of your mind, conscious and unconscious, is not well — undeveloped territory. Wherever we can observe the workings of our own mind it is of vast importance to us. It may be important to others; it ought to be important in our study of technique.

One interesting problem is how much must the mind be separated from the world in order to do its work. I read a very interesting thing of Einstein's the other day, which

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is worth thinking about. The gist of it was that quiet, solitude, separation from the world, complete, was the greatest stimulus to help creative thinking that is possible. This is a contradiction to what many writers feel that they must have the stimulus of life about them, of people. Who is right?

At all events of one thing I am sure that we must not only study the mind but we must protect it from too much contamination from the outside. The mind is about all we have that is sure in this world. V. Woolf calls for a room alone; the mind is only room which you can retire and be sure of no interruptions. Many of us learn that when we are children that we can go away in our minds and dream beautiful dreams, carry on marvelous adventures, see all the things that the world outside prevents our doing. Now if anyone has such a precious retreat as that he should respect it and he should use it.

I shall have to tell you what brought me to this consideration of the mind which I have been so blindingly trying to reproduce for you. In these battling years through which we have just been passing, battling on the material side, I like all the rest have been forced to ask if it might not

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be possible before we got through with this thing that all the material support of life would be swept away and then I said what have you got. And the quotation which was precious to me in my youth popped into my head - a quotation which was my justification for going off by myself and thinking of all sorts of crazy and fantastic things. The quotation was, "My mind to me a Kingdom is." And I said to myself, "Well, if they do sweep out all my material support they can't take away that. I will go off and sit down in this protected room of mine and dream my dreams. I became so interested in that quotation I looked up its origin, possibly it is familiar to you. I suppose I must have read it in the years when I was reading early English literature but I had quite forgotten it. It is some four hundred years old and here is the poem from which it comes -

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