

50 'Great' Works of Literature We Don't Need?

By Peter Osnos

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LONDON—A book—or, as some would have it, an anti-book—with the compelling title, "50 Works of English Literature We Could Do Without," was unleashed here recently by three stalwarts of Britain's irreverent intelligensia.

In 150 pages (19 of which are blank), the likes of "Hamlet," "Tom Jones," "Lady Chatterley's Lover," "A Farewell to Arms" and the collected poems of Edith Sitwell and A. E. Housman are reduced to the category of "weeds" in the lush forest of English—the reference is to the language—literature.

The authors are novelist Brigid Brophy, best known for her punchy social and literary criticism; Miss Brophy's husband, Michal Levey, one of Britain's leading art critics and deputy keeper of the National Gallery, and Charles Osborne, assistant literature director of the government-sponsored Arts Council and an authority on the operas of Verdi.

Their purpose, they say in a convincing introduction, is lofty: "English literature as it is presented by pundits to inquiring persons is choked with the implied obligation to like dull books. In making a start on weeding it, we have been moved by our sense of the injustice done alike to great authors and to the public. . . .

"We have written this book on the

principle enunciated by Coleridge: 'Praises of the unworthy are felt by ardent minds as robberies of the deserving.'"

That being said however, the authors embark on a kind of literary blitzkrieg, knocking off a "Beowulf" with 500 words here and a "Moby Dick" with 1000 words there. Faulkner, for example, is dismissed in slightly more than a page and characterized as a "vain and humorless purveyor of turgid Southern tosh."

Hemingway is described as "coarse, crass, the Ouida of the '30s," and Somerset Maugham has a "window dresser's idea of elegance and shop assistant's concept of romance. When he writes of Tahiti, his language is that of a travel agent."

The classics covered in the book also include works by Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Walt Whitman, Lewis Carroll, the Brontes, Thomas Gray, John Galsworthy and Aldous Huxley. The temptation to treat the whole business as so much cocktail party clatter is enormous.

British reviewers attacked the book with vehemence. "The authors have established themselves as incomparably the three biggest twits in Britain," intoned the London Daily Mail's Bernard Levin. The word "twit," he added, matched exactly the trio's "spirit of adolescent, pompous, giggling silliness." The headline of the New Statesman's review of "50 Works of

English Literature We Could Do Without" was simply—"The Fifty-First."

Kenneth Allsop, in the London Evening News, summed up the argument best. "You can't defrock a high priest by calling him a boring old charlatan," he wrote. "You have to prove he is a boring old charlatan by peeling off his robes—stitch by stitch."

And therein lies the essence of the argument. No one doubts the value of a debunk (healthy hooliganism, Allsop calls it), but the successful iconoclast must treat lightly; the line between carping and criticism is narrow. Miss Brophy, Levey and Osborne have tripped over it.

But the book has value, and this even the livid Levin inadvertently acknowledges. Who among us has waded through the classics without ever feeling a sense of despair? Many a college-age head has hit the pillow at the very thought of such as "Lorna Doone" and "The Faerie Queene."

"I suspect we've involuntarily started a panic," Miss Brophy wrote in answer to her critics. "Democracy works by majorities, science by proofs, but no one's response to art is any good except your own."

"Of course you (and we) are fallible. But received opinion of 'the verdict of posterity' is no surer. Try to adopt other people's experience of art and you merely resign from experiencing art. We exposed the shakiness of received opinion and it turned out that most critics had been leaning on it."

The 50 Minorpieces

FOLLOWING is the list of the 50 works:

"Beowulf" an English epic of Norse legend.
"The York Mystery Plays," religious dramas of the 13th to 16th centuries.
"The Faerie Queene," by Edmund Spenser.
"The Alchemist," by Ben Johnson.
"Hamlet," by William Shakespeare.
"Pilgrim's Progress," by John Bunyan.
"Moll Flanders," by Daniel Defoe.
"Tom Jones," by Henry Fielding.
"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," by Thomas Gray.
"She Stoops to Conquer," by Oliver Goldsmith.
"The School for Scandal," by Richard Brinsley Sheridan.
"I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," the poem "The Daffodil," by William Wordsworth.
"The Brides of Lammermoor," by Sir Walter Scott.
"The Essays of Elia," by Charles Lamb.
"The Confessions of an English Opium Eater," by Thomas De Quincey.
"The Dream of Gerontius," by John Henry Newman.
"The Scarlet Letter," by Nathaniel Hawthorne.
"Aurora Leigh," by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.
"The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table," by Oliver Wendell Holmes.
"Pickwick Papers," by Charles Dickens.
"The Warden," by Anthony Trollope.
"Jane Eyre," by Charlotte Bronte.

"Wuthering Heights," by Emily Bronte.
"Moby Dick," by Herman Melville.
"Leaves of Grass," by Walt Whitman.
"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," by Lewis Carroll.
"Tom Brown's Schooldays," by Thomas Hughes.
"The Golden Treasury," an anthology of 16th and 19th century poetry.
"Lorna Doone," by R. D. Blackmore.
"Huckleberry Finn," by Mark Twain.
"Tess of the D'Urbervilles," by Thomas Hardy.
"Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins."
"Esther Waters," by George Moore.
"Poems of A. E. Housman."
"The Hound of Heaven," by Francis Thompson.
"Peter Pan," by Sir James Barrie.
"An Habitation Enforced," by Rudyard Kipling.
"The History of Mr. Polly," by H. G. Wells.
"The Forsythe Saga," by John Galsworthy.
"South Wind," by Norman Douglas.
"The Moon and Sixpence," by W. Somerset Maugham.
"To the Lighthouse," by Virginia Woolf.
"Lady Chatterley's Lover," by D. H. Lawrence.
"1914 Sonnets," by Rupert Brooke.
"Collected Poems of Edith Sitwell".
"Notes on 'The Waste Land,'" by T. S. Eliot.
"Point Counter Point," by Aldous Huxley.
"The Sound and the Fury," by William Faulkner.
"The Silver Chair," by C. S. Lewis.
"A Farewell to Arms," by Ernest Hemingway.