

Georgism and Escapism

A SERMON

By Janet Rankin Aiken

For a long time now I have been thinking that the current definitions of "escape" are inaccurate—or rather, that there are two different forms of escape, only one of which is contemplated in the contemporary discussion of the phenomenon.

Take for example the English novel. In the late 1700's there flourished a thing called the Gothic romance, very popular among pre-Victorian females until Jane Austen pricked its pretensions with the needle of her quiet sanity and wit. The Gothic novel was an impossible farago of horrors, featuring haunted houses, exhumed graves, shrieks, groans, and shudders. Melodrama, we would call it today. I call it escapist.

Take the daily tabloid—or leave it if you prefer. Is it not much of a piece with melodrama and the Gothic novel? Do we not find in its pages impossible sins, incredible crimes, distorted motives, in a word, events which never happen in the realms of sanity? But they do happen, you say. Yes, once in a blue moon; if they happened oftener they would cease being news. Varied by a few Cinderella stories of impossible good fortune, these tabloids constitute the escapist reading of the average person.

For escape is by no means exclusively to be defined as a trip into rose-tinted regions of bliss. It is just as often, oftener if you go by the tabloids, escape into pain. The humdrum of life may be broken by excursions into tragedy as well as into romance; and many people, having the illusion that pain is somehow truer and more real than joy, incline to follow that path. It is by no accident that tragedy preceded comedy on the stage, or that the ballads of the common people of all ages are predominantly mournful. They form an escape from dull living.

Now it is in part at least this dream quality of people's thinking

which renders them susceptible to enslavement, domination, and oppression. Escapist reading and thinking have made them familiar with spectacular good and spectacular evil, and so they are not awake to the very quiet, sheltered, twilight paths along which actual oppression is likely to tread. Because slavery is respectable, traditional, and unobtrusive, they incline to take it lightly, applying such opprobrious epithets as faddist and visionary to those who are able to see clearly whence oppression comes.

The Georgist is not an escapist. To him life, actual, everyday life, is

good and tremendously interesting. He perceives that it is here that the battle must be fought, and not in any impossible realm of torment or of bliss. He understands that human faces are careworn, not through any extraordinary or criminal operations, but through injustice so innocent-appearing that it is mistaken for justice, inequity so hallowed by custom as to be almost unrecognizable for what it is. The Georgist seeks to transform our cramped, penny-pinching world into one where escape will lose much of its narcotic appeal.