

January 23, 1952

Mr. John D. Barnhart, Editor,  
The Indiana Magazine of History,  
Bloomington, Indiana

Dear Mr. Barnhart,

May I ask you for the privilege of making a brief rejoinder to a book review which appeared in a recent issue of the *Indiana Magazine of History*? I refer to William Hugh Jansen's appraisal of Bertha K. Ehrmann's *Max Ehrmann: A Poet's Life*.

I note that Jansen begins his review with a "guess" instead of the knowledge which alone should qualify a reviewer. Even if Jansen's "guess"—a tentative opinion, a supposition, a surmise, a conjecture—were correct, his acknowledgement that Max Ehrmann's work had "made a deep impression on some very respectable critics" should have made him reflect that many artists, especially musicians, came to command of wide appreciation years after their deaths. Jansen's attempt at "orienting the reader" is an awkward performance. Apologizing in advance, he makes an odious comparison, then thinks of another "perhaps better" and writes it and leaves the first standing to waste valuable space on the printed page.

Moreover, Jansen seems not to keep in mind the normal course of a man's life, how Max Ehrmann like other men born in 1872 was twenty-eight in 1900, fifty-six by 1928, sixty-five by 1937, and seventy-three in 1945, the year of his death. What can be wrong about a Middle West poet's "life-long allegiance" to the country and the people of his birth and his home that is not wrong about a New Englander poet's "life-long allegiance" to New England—Robert Frost's, for example? Max Ehrmann's mind ranged far and wide; and appreciation came to him from "very respectable critics" as far away as London, England, and from "Maine to California." Yet Jansen would brand him "local sage!" There is obvious contradiction in the use of the epithet and the later qualification "of great national import."

One senses amused condescension in Jansen's reference to Max Ehrmann as a "character," a "type" worthy of study as such. But one can hardly dismiss in such cavalier fashion a man whose "A Prayer," translated into many languages, has served to restore faltering courage in the most remote parts of the earth.

It is to be regretted that Bertha K. Ehrmann's book could not have been reviewed by an older man, one old enough to have known Max Ehrmann and his writings through the years.

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