AN ENGLISH IMPRESSION OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

By Edward Shanks

THERE is always an immense difficulty in making any useful judgment on the literature of another country; and between England and America a second and very subtle difficulty is added to the first, which is that the first is inevitably masked by our common language. Language is indeed one of the determining factors in the character of any literature, but there are others — racial traits, social conditions, climate. Both peoples derive from the same tradition in poetry as in politics. The founders of American independence were in most respects indistinguishable from English Whigs; but the conditions under which their political ideas developed were very different and since that original parting of the ways new differences have supervened. The English Whigs became in some mysterious way the Liberal Party. The American Whigs, as I understand it (and if I am wrong I do but prove my point the more), became the Republican Party. Now an Englishman who attempted to interpret a Republican platform under the impression that Republicans and Liberals were very much the same thing would arrive at some extremely curious results. And, as a fact, educated and intelligent Englishmen do mostly realize how little they understand of the American system of politics and how little, without long and close study, they can ever hope to understand. The position is the same in the sphere of literature; but here, where unchallengeable facts are so scanty and where opinion counts for so much, it is harder to realize that the difference is so important. Yet in this difference probably lies the key to many misunderstandings.

When it was suggested to me that I should make a comparison between the younger writers of England and America, these reflections passed through my mind. I hesitated and was afraid. And eventually it seemed to me a more modest and reasonable enterprise to attempt to set down, as truthfully as possible, a view of the position which American literature holds in England today. If I attempted to estimate the precise value of the poetry of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, I might, through want of understanding, commit the most atrocious blunders. But if I say what many people here think about Mr. Lindsay, I shall be on the relatively safe ground of facts. If, as is quite likely, our chief failure with regard to American literature is in our ignorance of it, then no doubt what I have to say will successfully mirror that ignorance. My endeavor at all events will be to be objective, to state what I believe to be facts. Of course, no critic can speak save for himself. But this article is to consist of impressions, not of judgments. When I give an opinion of my

own, perhaps you can take it as a not uninteresting fact that such an opinion exists.

Many kinds of American books come over here. There are in England innumerable readers of the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Zane Grey, and other authors who hold a similar position. Jack London is still immensely popular with our larger public. Now in reading many of these books we are doing no more than continuing a very old tradition — a tradition that began, perhaps, with Fenimore Cooper. Most persons, all the world over, like from time to time to read stories of adventure and excitement; and in some parts at least of the American continent adventure and excitement lie closer to ordinary life than in any part of England. It would be a vast pity if the "Wild West" story were to perish from among us; and of course it will not perish. And Jack London (if I may express this opinion in passing) was a writer of genius, though sometimes one could wish that he had used his genius in some other way.

But American writers inferior to these have also their place here. Indeed just as American film manufacturers hold the English market in their grip, so American authors look very like capturing the market for that kind of popular fiction which resembles the film. This is of course purely a matter of commerce but it has its importance. The reason for it, or so at least I am told, is that American writers of fiction are paid in their own country prices so enormous that they can afford to sell their English rights at cutthroat rates. One cannot open a cheap English magazine without finding two or three stories in which obviously Broadway has been altered to Piccadilly or Harvard to Cambridge. This is a silly and stultifying business, for what may happen in (or should I say "on"?) Broadway does not happen so naturally in Piccadilly and the customs of Harvard are, of course, not those of Cambridge. It annoys me to read, for example, of a young man walking down Piccadilly and meeting the daughter of the president of the bank in which he is employed — for in England banks do not have presidents but chairmen and managing directors. There is no elevated railway in London and it is disconcerting to find one spanning the Strand. It is disconcerting to find doings which would be perfectly normal at Harvard placed in the campus at Cambridge, where there is no campus. But these alterations are always made, it seems, by ignorant and slovenly subeditors; and the readers of these papers, who are not well informed to begin with, get their minds horribly confused.

Moreover, I do object to the wholesale introduction of American turns of expression into common English speech. Do not take me as affecting any would be snobbish contempt for what may fairly be called the American language. I should find it hard to get through the day without telling my dog that I would knock his block off if he didn't cut out the rough stuff — which I have always fondly believed to be sound, idiomatic American. I do not even despise cockney, which is very likely the future speech of educated people in this island and which, if it proves so, will probably give us a richer and more musical tongue than any we have had since Elizabethan times. But I do object to the ignorant and mechanical effacement of genuine local peculiarities. It does hurt my feelings when I find (as I do find) the

accent of Gloucestershire being ousted by that used among elementary school teachers in Birmingham or the accent of Sussex being degraded into that used among elementary school teachers in London. It would seem to me equally a pity if the speech of Virginia gave way to the speech of Chicago, though heaven forbid that I should attempt to judge between them or even to point out in what they differ. Let us by all means pick up from anywhere any expressive and assimilable phrase; but let us avoid everywhere as if it were the devil the wholesale adoption of a manner of speech which has grown up in different circumstances and breaks with all our traditions. Perhaps you can judge from my fears and my indignation that one kind of American literature enjoys among us every sort of triumph.

But it is also a fact (and it is best to be plain about it at once) that American literature of a more serious, a more ambitious, and a better kind is not often equally triumphant here. Of course I have heard English opinions on American literature as a whole expressed in every variety, from the highly contemptuous to the highly appreciative. There is said to be a college at Oxford where nothing else is read or allowed to be worthy of praise. There the quads do echo with arguments on the respective merits of Edwin Arlington Robinson and Carl Sandburg; and only those American poets are neglected who are generally received in England. But I think it may be taken with fair safety that that college is exceptional. On the whole English opinion is not so enthusiastic. And there was once an American poet and critic who hinted, in an English paper, very politely and inoffensively but also very firmly, that the real reason why the English treated American poetry with (as he wrongly imagined) condescension and contempt was to be found simply in jealousy. This is a symptom of the misunderstanding produced when national differences are masked by a common language.

It is this jealousy, he went on to say, if I remember correctly, which makes English critics demand of American authors that they should be distinctively and even crudely American. They pretend that American literature which has not a native tang to it is merely feebly imitative of English models and not worthy of English notice. Now the charge of jealousy I do flatly deny: whatever our guilt may be it is not that. And when I first read the continuation of the charge I denied that too. But there is something in it, more truth than I could see in it at first. The quality of "Americanism", if such a word may be used, is one that we do very often particularly look for in American literature; and this bias of ours cuts now this way and now that. We find in one writer native characteristics, local color, things our own writers are without; and the fact awakes our interest and our appreciation. We find in another traces no less obvious of "Americanism"; and they strike us somehow as being slightly grotesque and incongruous. If the American literary world felt inclined to argue with us, it might say that we do not know what we want, with more justice than that we are jealous.

The indecision in our attitude goes back a good deal further than the present day. Longfellow has been for many years the most widely popular in England of all American poets. He is still with us, and I imagine with you, the introduction of most young

boys to poetry. But, for all his themes, for all his Hiawatha and his "forests primeval", there is little in his work which betrays in what continent he was born and reared. So too is it with many of his contemporaries and associates. Literature at that time passed across the Atlantic far more freely and with far less fuss than ever since. Longfellow was then, for us, an English poet who lived on that side and Tennyson was an English poet who lived on this. We thought, certainly, Tennyson the better of the two; but we also thought both of them better than some of their English contemporaries. It was with Whitman, I believe, that the idea of "Americanism" entered the field of literary criticism; and it was Whitman's fate to be rejected and accepted as "characteristically American".

It depended of course largely then on whether you thought Whitman a good poet or not. But if he was anything at all he was a new kind of poet; and he asserted and his readers believed, that this new kind of poetry was the characteristic contribution of America to the literature of the world. And he was able to give a certain definite reality to his assertion. He had a great national event and a great national hero to celebrate, and these things made concrete his celebration of a great national idea. "I hear", he proclaimed, "I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear, those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong. . . ." He left you under no doubt that he himself and what he had to say were distinctively American. And if you were exhilarated by a barbaric yawp sounding over the roof of the world, you praised him for it: if, on the other hand, it grated too much on your delicate ears, you blamed him for it. But, again, you praised or blamed him as "the poet of America"; and that at least was indubitably right, for Whitman's poetry was a thing which it is most unlikely any set of circumstances could ever have produced in England. It was indeed the first expression of a new civilization: the differences which had grown up under the cloak of a common language had at last become articulate.

But a poet does not *necessarily* express the civilization in which he has been brought up; and while this is true of good poets, it is true with unusual force of bad poets. Bad poets, of whom there is no lack anywhere in the world, are generally forced to produce a mixture of the trite and the exotic: to be trite it is their nature and to cover that with a veneer of the exotic it is their cunning. There are American poets (some of them domiciled in England) and English poets (some of them domiciled in America) who would be no better than nuisances whencever they came or wherever they went. Let us dismiss them from the argument: they have no relevance to it whether they derive the stuff they retail from the Greeks or the Victorians or the latest mountebank of Montparnasse. But among the American authors most admired by lovers of poetry in England is Robert Frost; and of Mr. Frost one commonly thinks without remembering his nationality. It does not in the least matter that the setting of most of his work is New England. That is just a local peculiarity; and one feels that it might just as well have been Kent, if Mr. Frost had happened to be a native of Kent. When Mr. Frost writes of the colt in the mountain pasture:

> And now he comes again with a clatter of stone
> And mounts the wall again with whited eyes.

And all his tail that isn't hair up straight.
He shudders his coat as if to throw off flies.
Whoever it is that leaves him out so late
When everything else has gone to stall and bin
Ought to be told to go and bring him in.

— when Mr. Frost writes that, he is writing a new kind of poetry but it is not distinctively American. He is not expressing a new civilization but rather certain of the still numerous things our two civilizations have in common. And no better proof of this can be found than the undoubted fact that our own Edward Thomas learned so much from him. And Edward Thomas's poems make one of the most beautiful descriptions of England and of a man's love for his own native soil that we have.

But the question of "Americanism" and what we make of it is a more interesting point for my present purpose. What better illustration could there be at the present day than Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, whose reputation in England is much greater than that of Mr. Frost? I have noticed that many Americans show signs of annoyance when an Englishman praises Mr. Lindsay. One of our reviews once spoke of him in high terms and received an indignant letter from an American poet who compared him with Mr. Kipling and said that he had the same free and easy facility, the same preference for ragtime rhythms, the same tone of vulgar optimism, the same desire to preach a gospel, as the author of "Mandalay". I hold the opinion, heterodox no doubt, that Mr. Kipling with all his faults is a pretty good poet; and therefore the comparison, to me, is not so damaging as might have been wished. I also fail to see why the desire to preach a gospel should be damning in itself. Most good poets have it: even Verlaine had it. But my point is that the irritation displayed by this gentleman is not an infrequent thing. Many Americans are bored by Mr. Lindsay; and when they hear one of us remarking that he is the only poet in America today they begin to see red.

My further point is that a number of English readers do think and say this. Mr. Lindsay, so far as I know, was first spoken of in this country by W. B. Yeats who returned from a transatlantic visit full of enthusiasm. Two more dissimilar poets could not well be imagined. A characteristic line from Mr. Yeats is:

Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

A characteristic line from Mr. Lindsay is:

Rallying the trusts against the bawling flannelmouth.

But Mr. Yeats came back and told us that Mr. Lindsay had genius. Later on, Robert Nichols also came back and said the same thing. Finally Mr. Lindsay himself crossed over and repeated the statement, which by that time we had already come to believe. And his visit to England proved the esteem in which he is held here. His photograph appeared in the morning illustrated papers, an honor not often accorded to a foreign author, though Anatole France recently received it when Charlie Chaplin announced that he liked him for reading in bed. I am told that any insignificant English author gets more attention in New York (this is a point to which I shall recur) than Mr. Lindsay in London. But here we are very moderate in our attentions to authors: if all the winners of the Nobel Prize landed in a body the British public would not turn over in his sleep. Mr. Lindsay re-

ceived, by comparison, an ovation; and there is no doubt that our interest in him is a real thing.

Also there is no doubt that our interest in him is largely caused by what we think to be his "Americanism". As I have said, if Mr. Frost had been born in Kent instead of New England, he would still have been very much the same sort of poet. But if Mr. Lindsay had been born in, say, Nottingham (I do not know any exact parallel for Springfield, Illinois, a town on which I have heard him speak at some length) he could not very well have been the same sort of poet. How could he? The social conditions and the spiritual atmosphere are different and it is out of these that he makes his poetry, not so much out of the ordinary response of every human being to the influences of nature.

I have read Mr. Lindsay's "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan!" and I have heard him recite it; and, in common with many other Englishmen, I think it a great poem. It expresses a political sentiment, which is a good thing to do. It does more: it expresses political sentiment itself, the feeling a young man has for political causes and those whom he thinks the leaders of his nation. What does it matter if Mr. Bryan should have been a charlatan or a common demagogue? Mr. Lindsay did not think so when he cheered himself hoarse in 'ninety-six; and it is his impulse to cheer which he has embodied in this poem. And the close of it is a lament so noble and so affecting that one easily forgets that it is made up out of names familiar to us in newspaper headlines or of names that no Englishman has ever heard before. I do not think this thing could have been done in England, just as no Englishman could ever have played the part of President Roosevelt or of President Wilson. The conditions are different, the atmosphere is different. Mr. Lindsay may not express the whole of American civilization, but it is that civilization and no other which permits him to do what he has done.

This, I assert, is a strong and a legitimate claim on our interest, a claim to which in some degree we have responded. But though, as I have admitted, we do ask for "Americanism" in American books, do we always understand it or like it when we have got it? There is a recently developed branch of American literature concerning which this question may be asked with especial force. I mean that school of writers which attempts to portray the life of the American small town. Possibly you recognize no such school; but in my mind, for what that is worth, these writers inevitably group themselves together. The best known of them in this country is undoubtedly Edgar Lee Masters, whose "Spoon River Anthology" made a little sensation here some years ago and whose more recent "Domesday Book" has been a good deal discussed. Another is Sinclair Lewis, whose "Main Street" was published here not long ago but has hardly repeated the amazing success it had across the water. And there is Sherwood Anderson whose stories I have been reading lately.

Now the American small town, though it is obviously an outstanding phenomenon in America, is, as far as I can judge, something to which we have no parallel. One thing about it is immediately clear: the American writer hates it like poison. When Willa Cather, who is not one of the specialists on the subject, brings one of her artist heroes home to be buried in his native place she gives rein to

her feelings. To this attitude we have something of a parallel. A few years ago there was a rage among English authors for abusing and satirizing the middle class Nonconformist household, where the young were suppressed and systematically bored, where all interests centred around the chapel, and where illiberalism of mind was tempered only by a dash of hypocrisy. A conspicuous example of this genre was Stanley Houghton's play, "The Younger Generation". Mr. Bennett took a hand in it. The watchword of the school was "Down with parents!" and while it lasted they got a good deal of fun out of it. But the English chapel group is only a section of a community. It is not a community in itself, it shades off at the edges, it is open to all kinds of outside influences; and it bears only the smallest relation to the "small town" as depicted by American writers.

That small town is, I think, to speak frankly, a puzzle and rather a bore to English readers. It is clearly a question of importance in the country of its origin. I know a lady from Colorado, now married to an Englishman, who when she read Sinclair Lewis's "Main Street" burst into tears: it reminded her so much of home, which she hoped she had left behind her forever. But we are too unfamiliar with its character, too little touched by its influence, to take much interest in these detailed descriptions of it. Perhaps if many of us had been brought up in and had escaped from, or hoped to escape from, such surroundings, we might more easily sympathize with Mr. Lewis's heroine and laugh more at the young man who could imitate the noises made by a hen. But we do not. It is too remote from us. We gaze on it a minute as a curiosity and then begin to think of other things.

Mr. Masters and Mr. Anderson, of course, are less photographic and more artistically ambitious than Mr. Lewis. Mr. Masters goes for the truth about human nature; and the poet will find the same fundamental things true about humanity whether in LeRoy or in Birmingham. Mr. Anderson is out not so much to describe a particular phase of society as to write good short stories. There is a touch of Chekhov about him. But in both these writers I cannot help feeling too much insistence on things that are local and temporary and which besides mean nothing to us. They are, so far as we are concerned, if I may use the word without offense, provincial. There is no harm in the use of a local setting. No one that ever I heard of has complained of the setting of Mark Twain's stories or of O. Henry's stories. But there is an obvious difference between filling in your background with local details and making your picture all background.

This contrast may throw some light on our confusion as to what we really want from American literature. For there is no doubt that we are confused. We like Mr. Lindsay, as we like Whitman, because he is American, because he could not have been anything else. On the other hand, I have heard it alleged as a reason for admiring Mr. Hergesheimer that, if you did not know, you could not tell that he was American at all. Very likely, apart from his scenes, one would not know, and for the very good cause that he has followed with great fidelity two English authors — Mr. Conrad and Mr. Galsworthy. But, and very largely on account of this fact, Mr. Hergesheimer has enjoyed a great success in England, though none of his later books have redeemed the promise in parts of "The Three Black Pennys".

So, it is fair to say, the two sides of our confusion cancel out and do at least relieve us from prejudice. And so far as our demand for "Americanism" goes, is it not perfectly justified? The literature of a people is in very large part determined in character by the particular form of civilization which that people enjoys. Your civilization is necessarily different from ours. Climate, political institutions, social structure, the vast distances, the association of countries so dissimilar as the New England farms and the western desert, all these combine; and in face of them it seems almost ridiculous to insist on so obvious a fact. Therefore when American writers come before us, it is only natural that we should ask what it is that they have which is peculiar to themselves. If they have nothing peculiar, if what they offer us might just as well have come from London or Paris or Munich, they stand under strong suspicion of not being in touch with the life they claim to portray: they are under suspicion of having merely imitated other writers. This, of course, is not invariably so. Mr. Frost and, in part, Mr. Hergesheimer are exceptions. But generally speaking it is so. Since the Civil War it has been increasingly probable that any good American writer would be distinctively American, that his work would show signs of having been produced in another atmosphere than ours — just as the writings of, say, Anatole France and Gabriele D'Annunzio have been obviously produced in another atmosphere. And the more recent American authors who have had the widest popularity here, who have pleased all sections of the community, Mark Twain and Whitman and O. Henry, have all passed this test.

There is another test that they have passed. Their subject is humanity, as it is embodied in the American people, certainly, but still humanity. I have said that the poetry of Whitman and of Mr. Lindsay could not have been produced elsewhere; but it expresses feelings fundamentally comprehensible by, and interesting to, the members of other peoples. It is not concerned solely or preponderatingly with superficial and temporary things, as is so often the work of the American small town writers and of the English opponents of Nonconformist household tyranny. I imagine that it is very natural that this limited concern should often appear in a relatively new and rapidly developing civilization. I am pretty sure that it is what English readers are thinking of when sometimes they commend an American writer on the ground that "you would never know he was an American", just as the same persons are thinking of what has satisfied them in Whitman and Mr. Lindsay when they condemn some other writer for not being "American enough".

Art indubitably crosses frontiers; but there is equally indubitably a frontier to be crossed between the American and the English peoples, though I do firmly believe that they are better fitted to understand one another than any other people to understand either of them. And the art that is to cross frontiers must be art of a particular kind. It must be built on large lines and it must go pretty deep into human nature. Much that is very good of its sort never does so. There are excellent English writers who will never be fully appreciated in America; and I should be astonished to learn that there are not American authors whose merits I am incapable of understanding. But in the end it seems likely that the position we are in, with

two divergent civilizations expressing themselves in a common language, may have a happy result. Every literature needs to be fertilized from time to time from the outside; and how many times multiplied are the opportunities of fertilization when every writer has free access to another literature without being obliged to know a foreign language! Certainly, as I have said, our common language often masks the differences between us to an extent that is positively dangerous; but this danger will inevitably be discovered. And then — this kind of prophecy is a not unamiable amusement — the two literatures will exist side by side, each conscious alike of kinship and of independence, freely exchanging such discoveries as are suitable for exchange. The literature of America which, it is no offense to say, is, in its independence, a comparatively recent thing, dating at the earliest from the Civil War, will have assimilated its prodigious and constantly arising new materials, will have grown richer, more even and more fruitful; and the literature of England will learn from it without pretense and without affectation.

I have, I find on looking back at it, written an exceedingly impertinent article. But the impertinence, though at first I hardly realized it, was implicit in what I set out to do. My object was to make a *compte rendu* of a very large subject, to give evidence, as it were, on a point at issue, and my ignorance of the subject, if it should betray itself, was to be not the least significant detail in evidence. I do not flatter myself that anyone will derive signal profit from what I have said, but there may be something useful in what I have not had the wit either to say or to know.