THE NOVELIST'S OMNISCIENCE AND SOME RECENT BOOKS.

IN one of his new series of *Avowals*, Mr. George Moore recently commented upon Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* in a way that was not only thoroughly characteristic but full of suggestive interest. The comment was based upon the scene of Rawdon Crawley's inopportune return from the debtor's prison—the scene in which Becky desperately affirms her innocence and the Marquis of Steyne receives the scar which he is destined to carry to his dying day. But whether Becky is really innocent or not is never told; and the purport of Mr. Moore's criticism is that a writer who is so ignorant of his heroine's nature that he does not know whether her temperament is warm or cold hardly deserves the high rank accorded to the author of *Vanity Fair*. Whether the case in question was well chosen is open to debate—for even if Thackeray chose to feign ignorance regarding Becky's conduct, he at least represents Rawdon as having no doubt whatever about the matter—yet the underlying principle is perfectly sound, that in every novel there are certain crucial questions about which the writer has no business to be ignorant. Omniscience, indeed, is a prerogative of the novelist. The joys and the responsibilities of creation are his. The lives and antecedents of his characters, the thoughts they think, the little world in which they play their part, are all the outcome of his personal whim, with the single restriction, that he may not transgress the established laws of nature. He is equally arbiter of life and death over his hero, whether he write lurid melodrama or the most humdrum realism of uneventful lives. He may kill off the hero at a moment's notice, or he may save him at the eleventh hour, provided only that he kills him by some natural mode of death, or saves him by a method recognised by the medical profession. He and he alone is responsible for the

shape of the heroine's nose, the colour of her eyes and hair, whether he accepts the responsibility or seeks to shift it, by the laws of heredity, to the long line of ancestors that he himself has invented for her. And after the author has endowed his personages with their bodily form, chosen the clothes they shall wear and the emotions they shall feel, it is not too much to ask that he shall take the trouble to study his own creations sufficiently to know what they are going to do in any of the situations that he chooses to thrust upon them.

As a matter of fact, a good many authors do not take this trouble; and that is the secret of much of the slipshod fiction that finds its way into print. Of all the advice which might be given to the young novelist, none would be more useful than the cardinal rule, not to put pen on paper until he knows his characters, one and all, not merely for the brief period of the story's duration, but for the whole extent of their lives—until he feels quite sure what they would do under any assignable combination of circumstances, in a fire, a flood, a shipwreck, a railroad collision; until he can tell you whether his hero is a Presbyterian or a Buddhist, even if the novel in question is not a religious novel; or whether he is Republican or Democrat, even though politics will not be mentioned from the first page to the last. On the other hand, it is by no means the novelist's duty to tell all he knows, or even the major part of it. The universe lies before him, as before the landscape painter, but he may choose his own field and limit himself to it, just as the artist limits himself by the four margins of his canvas. An author, for instance, may choose to circumscribe his tale within the limits of a certain street, or a certain building, or a certain room. Within those limits, he will tell you everything his men and women say and think and do; but when they turn the corner, or leave the house, or close the door of the particular room behind them, they pass absolutely beyond the reader's sight and ken. Or again, the author may limit his knowledge to that of a particular character of the story. Wherever that character is free to go, the reader is free to follow; whatever that character is in a position to know, the reader may share with him. But we cannot justly complain of his silence about matters which take place beyond these definitely assigned bounds than we may quarrel with the landscape painter for his failure to show us the trees growing behind a barn, the sun that has sunk below the horizon.

Among all the questions which arise to perplex the novelist there is probably none which involves a more delicate art than this very one of the limits which he should set to his own knowledge. And the manner in which he answers this question goes a long way towards helping to class him under one or the other of the two great subdivisions into which modern fiction naturally falls—the realistic and the psychological. The student of modern life, to whichever school he belongs, has come to look upon it as a game of skill, rather than a game of chance. The realist sees life as a chessboard, and he shows it to the reader as such. He sets forth the situation with endless minuteness and fidelity, the position of every pawn, the history of every move that has gone before. He shows us each successive step as the game goes on, but what is yet to come, what lies concealed in the mind of the player, we must wait to know until his next move reveals it. To the analytical writer, on the contrary, life is not purely a game of skill; it resembles, rather, a hand at cards, in which the cards themselves stand for that particular allotment of talents inherited or acquired, which go to make up each man's individuality. The psychological novelist takes his stand beside life's card table, at such an angle that he may overlook the hand of one or more of the players, and watch the game from the standpoint of their secret knowledge. He may even walk around the table, so to speak, and overlook the cards of each player in turn, and thus be in a position to anticipate far in advance the outcome of the game. Just how many hands he will take the liberty to overlook, how many human hearts he will submit to a remorseless psychological vivisection, is a question which each author must answer for himself.

It is an interesting fact, however, that the stories which held their own in popular favour are usually those that do not shift their point of view too often. If you turn to Jane Austen, as the type of placid, old-fashioned English realism,

you will that in *Emma*, for instance, she seldom moves far from her heroine's side. Emma's thoughts and hopes and desires are all recorded minutely; those of her father, or Mr. Knightley, or "poor" Miss Taylor are disclosed mainly through their individual utterances—and if they so much as cross the room from where Emma is seated, we usually cease to overhear them. Or take, at the opposite extreme, that prototype of all Soldier-of-Fortune fiction, *Les Trois Mousquetaires*. Dumas was not a man to hamper himself with theories or methods, and the principle must not be applied too rigidly in his case. But the fact remains that, so far as the vital part of the story goes—the expedition to London to recover the Queen's diamonds—whatever we see and hear is seen and heard through D'Artagnan's eyes and ears. When Athos and Porthos and Aramis successively fall by the wayside, they drop as completely out of the game as the pawn that is taken from the chessboard—what happens to them we do not know until later they tell it with their own lips. We cannot stop to help them; we are too busy, following close upon D'Artagnan's heels.

Nevertheless, the average reader demands, sooner or later, the truth, and the whole of it. He is impatient of deceptions and reservations; and for that reason many a writer sees nothing better to do than to lay bare the hearts of his characters one after another—to examine, as it were, all his available witnesses. There are just a very few writers who have realised that this method, while it may give facts and solve problems, can never mirror back life, in its subtler manifestations—the life that we each of us watch from day to day, in the homes of our friends and neighbours. The absolute truth regarding any human transaction, a bargain and sale, a street fight, a battle lost and won, is perhaps the rarest commodity in the world—the bare, tangible facts are in themselves hard enough to get at; the motives behind the acts lie concealed in each individual human heart. What we know of the lives outside of our own is not and never can be the absolute truth, but merely a creation of our own, built up from countless vague impressions, gathered we know not when or how, and gradually welded into shape in the laboratory of our brain. Often we touch elbows with casual strangers, almost unconscious of their presence. They do not come into our lives with a flourish of trumpets, like the hero of a popular melodrama. Weeks may pass, and we may meet them again and again, and they still remain for us little more than a symbol, a bare name, people that we may think of vaguely, as the Girl in Blue, the Man with the Queer Nose. And then suddenly a strange twist of destiny will lift a corner of the veil of mystery which surrounds each one of us, and we realise that they have become vital factors in our lives. Or again, there may be a man and a woman whose life-circles apparently touch only in the most casual manner—whom we have seen meet a hundred times and exchange their formal handclasp, their conventional words of greeting. And suddenly, one day, an indefinable something, an unguarded stress of voice, the flicker of an eyelid, brings us a luminous flash of intuition; and we know that unwittingly we have all the while been in the presence of a great, hidden tragedy—one that in all likelihood we shall never know in detail. A large part of life is made up of just such elusive, tantalising, unsatisfactory material, and to-day there is just one author writing in English who is sufficiently subtle and audacious to weave such material into the warp and woof of a novel.

A great deal has been written, and with justice, about the obscurity of Mr. James, his bewildering mannerisms, his maze of qualifying words and phrases, in which a reader wanders, as through a verbal mist, to end hopelessly in a blind alley of inexplicable syntax. But what has not been generally recognised is that the obscurity and the queerness lie, not so much in Mr. James's manner of telling a tale as in the tale itself that he has to tell. He is not stating a clear story in a hopelessly involved manner; he is giving as clear a statement as he can of a much befogged condition of facts—and that is a radically different matter. You may take an instantaneous photograph of the endless flood of human life in Piccadilly or Ludgate Hill, in the midst of a London fog; or you may make a time exposure of the same scene on a clear June morning —and in both cases the result will be a

blur; but in the one case the fault was the fault of nature; the blur was already there to be photographed; in the other case the fault was your own. It would be an interesting experiment to take a chapter from one of Mr. James's recent books, read it over and over until one were quite sure of having grasped all its subtle suggestions and semi-tones, its implications of things unknown and only vaguely guessed at, and then to sit down to rewrite it, within the same limits of space, on the condition of adding nothing and leaving nothing out. The chances are that the last state of that chapter would be decidedly worse than the first.

In many ways, *The Ambassadors* will prove to be easier reading than the last three or four volumes by Mr. James have been. To begin with, he has obviously had, aside from the particular set of characters that he undertakes to study, a very definite central thought, a thought which his careful labours upon the biography of the sculptor Storey has naturally kept uppermost in his mind,—namely, the influence of Europe, its older culture, its radically different standards, upon the American temperament. Perhaps the best brief definition of *The Ambassadors* which can be given is, A study of the New England conscience, subjected to the hot-house atmosphere of the Parisian *Vie de Bohême*. And secondly the characters are chiefly American characters, deliciously, refreshingly American—yet the sort of Americans that you usually have to go to Europe to discover. To give a straightforward analysis of *The Ambassadors* would be to do violence to Mr. James's literary creed. He himself never gives you straightforward facts, but merely a series of impressions. And these you have to take as he gives them and let them accumulate and sink in, until their ultimate significance gradually dawns upon you. You do not need to wait long for an impression of Mr. Strethers; you get him in the opening page—a tall, thin, overworked man of letters, something better, yet not much better than a hack-writer, who has suddenly had the unexpected boon of a vacation, a private embassy to Paris, which may lengthen out for weeks and months. Strethers is a product of Woolett, Mass., and he is unpleasantly conscious of the fact—he feels that "it sticks out all over him." He has the New England conscience, but for the time being it is in abeyance. He is as receptive of new impressions as a sensitised plate and he means to enjoy himself, in spite of the burden of his special mission. Gradually it is revealed that he is in Paris in the interest of Mrs. Newsome—imposing, portly, prosperous Mrs. Newsome, the mature widow who is a power not to be ignored in Woolett, Mass. The source of all the trouble is Mrs. Newsome's son "Chad," who for some years has made Paris his home and whose letters during the earlier months were a periodic anxiety, which finally merged in a still greater anxiety, due to the absence of any letters at all. Mr. Strethers is commissioned to go to Paris, to discover if possible all the "unspeakable things" that Chad has supposably been doing, and at all events bring him back, a prodigal but repentant son, to Woolett—after which, it is inferred, the mature charms and ample fortune of Mrs. Newsome will be at Mr. Strether's disposal. Now just what Chad Newsome's life in Paris has been through all these years, and just what there is for Mr. Strethers to investigate, matters very little. What does concern us is to know what Mr. Strethers thinks that he finds out, the series of impressions which he receives. Somehow the atmosphere and traditions of the Latin Quarter, the laughter and the light and the gaiety of Paris gradually filter into Strethers's blood; the men he meets, and more especially the women, are all so different from what he had pictured them from the vantage-ground of far-away provincial Woolett, that his standards of morality undergo a curious and interesting readjustment. And acting according to this new light, he gives Chad some surprising advice, calculated permanently to wreck his own chances of ever filling the offices of the defunct Mr. Newsome. And yet throughout more than five hundred pages, Mr. Strethers has been wandering in a mental haze. He has not really known the simple basic fact that has kept Chad Newsome all these years in Paris. He has seen Chad and Mme. Vionnet in each other's company day after day; he has talked with them, singly and together, until he thinks there is nothing left for him to know. And yet the sim-

ple, elemental truth about them does not dawn upon him until the morning that he wanders alone out to the rural districts beyond Rennes, and there in one of those idyllic spots dear to artists, sees a rowboat containing a man who held the paddles, and a lady in the stern, with a pink parasol—saw them, recognised them, and suddenly awakened to a knowledge of infinite and undreamed possibilities. A book with all the tantalising vagueness of real life, and one which surely no one other than Henry James could have written.

There is no subtle haze of doubt surrounding the crudities of life in *The Masterfolk*, by Haldane McFall. He gives us the Bohemia of the Latin Quarter, unvarnished and grim, wine and woman and song side by side with sickness and starvation and suicide. He does not seemingly go in search of what is repellant and unclean and unspeakable, but he does push open the doors with scant ceremony that stand before him; and what he finds hidden behind them he reveals in plain, blunt English. There is little art in Mr. McFall's book—it is too long by fully one-third; it is overcrowded, both with characters and with incidents; and the plot is exasperatingly rambling and formless. Nevertheless there is a rugged strength about the book that is unmistakable. There are a score of people in it who are not only genuine, but whom you feel that you could dearly love if you met them in real life. There are here and there little touches of human nature that go far towards softening the prevailing crudity of the book. And unquestionably it gives us the life of the artist circle, the life of the "Boul' Mich" with a sympathetic understanding unapproached since the days of Henri Murger—unless indeed we except Du Maurier. Its obvious faults are easily understood; *The Masterfolk* is the work of a man who has been far more intent upon embodying his whole philosophy of life in a single book than in giving to that book an artistic symmetry.

If there is scant art in Mr. McFall's book, there is art in abundance in Guy Wetmore Carryl's delicious little volume, *Zut and Other Parisians.* It belongs to the order of literary *pâtisserie*, the lightest, crispest, most inviting *bouche-bouche* of fiction that you well could ask, so typically French that it is hard to believe that a genuine Anglo-Saxon could have written it. The best thing yet said about *Zut* was the remark in a recent interview, that there were times when the volume fairly seemed to shrug its shoulders. From first to last it is pervaded with that spirit of indulgent irony which we are accustomed to associate with the writings of Anatole France. Certainly the initial story might have come straight from the pen of the creator of M. Bergeret. It is a story of jealous rivalry between the proprietress of an *épicerie* which has seen better days, and the young wife of a prosperous hairdresser who kept the adjoining shop. It is hard enough to see the tide of fortune setting against one, to watch day by day the increasing stream of custom flowing in at the doors of one's hated rival, while one's own custom steadily diminishes. But in this case the last straw is the ingratitude of Zut, Madame's big white Angora cat—capricious, pampered, typically feminine, who finds the dainty furnishings of a model barbershop more to her taste than the ill-smelling atmosphere of stale vegetables. So Zut accordingly enrolls herself in the ranks of the deserters, quite indifferent to the tragedies that may result. "Zut," the author explains in passing, is "a word which means at once everything and nothing." Accordingly it is well chosen as a title for a volume about the race that is preëminent in the art of passing over the serious catastrophes of life with gay laughter, and magnifying trifles into a national tragedy.

A volume which cannot be taken with any special seriousness, and yet which seems to fit in just here, is Albert Carman's story of *The Pensionnaires.* The life of the typical continental pension is admittedly unlike any other life on earth; the people you meet are unlike any other people; and the only wonder is that they have not been oftener utilised in fiction. Mr. Carman's volume is a rather clever picture of this life, bearing an occasional suggestion of cartoon art; and the background of the story, the atmosphere of Dresden from the enthusiastic tourist's point of view, is full of a suggestion of personal reminiscences that linger pleasantly in the author's thoughts. As for the story itself, there is no marked originality, but it is readable enough. A

young American girl, who has gone to Germany to cultivate her voice, is the despair of her teacher. Physically, she possesses a wonderful vocal instrument; but she sings without soul—her heart has never been awakened. Two men, however, come into her life, a dreamy, visionary Pole, and a stalwart, matter-of-fact Englishman, and under their combined influence she awakens and becomes the wonderful singer that nature intended her to be. But which of these men is to reap the reward for awakening her is a question that takes time to decide; and the ending of the book is disappointingly conventional.

There is too much originality rather than too little in Mrs. L. Silberrad's new story, *Petronilla Herozen*. From the very first Miss Silberrad has shown a promising degree of individuality. Her situations are unhackeneyed; her characters are refreshingly new; and there is a commendable smell of the soil, an atmosphere of hedgerow and thatched roof, about her pictures of English rural life. And yet a book like this latest one leaves a disheartening impression of tawdry melodrama. To be sure, you do not feel this while you read—to that extent the plot is redeemed by the style. But a brief epitome of the story inevitably reads like a burlesque. Petronilla is the natural child of a farmer's daughter, the first blot upon a good old yeoman family. An orphan, hated by her grandfather, she leads a lonely childhood, ostracised, roaming the fields and woods, and imbibing from other wild and lonely things something of their woodland habits, their stealthy tread and vengeful nature. At seventeen she is a strange, wayward girl over whom the good village folk shake their heads and predict that she will soon follow in her mother's footsteps. And now begins the melodrama. In the forest Petronilla meets a strange man, a crippled, scarred, gnarled piece of humanity, whom she knows simply as the Woodsman, who talks Schopenhauer to her and imbues her with a taste for Carlyle and the French Revolution. There is another man in the story, an incarnation of malice and hatred and revenge; and because he once loved Petronilla's mother, and the latter had disdained him, he follows up the girl with persistent cruelty, hounding her relentlessly, and exercising fiendish ingenuity in inventing new methods of injuring her. Between this man and the Woodsman there is a mysterious connection; and every now and then, when Petronilla reaches the limit of endurance, she appeals to the Woodsman, and he promptly sends a blue diamond to the other man. These blue diamonds have mysterious power; they make the other man turn very pale—they reduce him to lamb-like submission. But just why he turns pale, and just what hold these blue diamonds have upon him, is one of the many things that you never find out. Then Petronilla has a pet wolf, a full-grown, full-blooded, white wolf, that follows her everywhere, with steps as stealthy as her own. You know from the first that the wolf is one of Miss Silberrad's most important stage properties; you are sure that he is going to play the rôle of *deux ex machina* when the final catastrophe comes. And so he does, but he does it in such a tame, innocuous fashion that his wolfhood is quite wasted. A good-sized mastiff would have answered quite as well, and at less sacrifice of probabilities. Unquestionably the story holds your interest to the end, but when you lay it down you realise how thoroughly artificial was the trick of the diamonds and the wolf; you feel as though you had been hypnotised by a few bits of coloured glass—as though you had been fooled once too often by the idle cry of "Wolf! Wolf!"

Miss Silberrad's chief fault is that she leaves too many ragged ends to her story, too many mysteries that she either will not or cannot explain. In melodrama an author has no possible excuse for pleading ignorance, because it is the essence of melodrama that anything may happen, any explanation will be better than none at all. The biggest and most palpable of lies will be acceptable, if only the writer lies with persistent cheerfulness and brazen confidence. A more incredible tale than John Oxenham's *Barbe of Grand Bayou* has seldom been given to an indulgent public; and yet one cannot help respecting the author for his colossal assurance. Picture a section of the stormy sea-girt Breton coast, a particularly dangerous section, with sunken rocks, and a treacherous whirlpool, through which a deadly tide races at every ebb and flow. Picture a lonely

lighthouse out in the midst of the waves, warning mariners from the cliffs that no boat could live to reach. And then imagine that within the rock of those cliffs there lies, unknown and unsuspected, a vast cavern lit by narrow fissures through which sea gulls can barely make their way; a cavern that a man might reach by falling through a hole, a mere rabbit burrow, in the pasture land above, slipping, clutching, falling along a dark, slanting passage, to be shot suddenly into a black void, and fall endlessly until consciousness leaves him. Imagine such a man awakening to find himself a prisoner in a vast, dim vault, bewildered, unable to account for his presence there. And days slip by, and he keeps life within him with the scant food of sea gull's eggs, the few fish he can catch in the dark pools of the cave. And all day long he can see through a narrow crevice in nature's twelve-foot wall of stone, the distant lighthouse, and at rare intervals can catch a glimpse of a flitting form, the form of the woman he loves, who helps her father tend the light. The story of the man's imprisonment, of how he came to fall into the cavern, and who fell with him, and how he finally came out again, but came alone, is distinctly a good story of its kind. And it does not follow that a reviewer admires its kind, just because he is willing to give it cordial recognition.

Tapestry Novel is the phrase which has been coined for a type of fiction best represented by the works of Maurice Hewlett. It is an apt phrase, and one that grows upon you, the more you think of it. For if the strange, dim figures in old tapestries, the knights and crusaders, the cowled monks and fair ladies that look down at us from fabrics wrought by mediæval weavers, could suddenly be kindled with life, if warm red blood could be infused into their veins, beneath the reds and greens and tinselled threads of their trappings, then might their outlook upon life be something after the manner of the Hewlett novel. That Mr. Hewlett would have disciples was a foregone conclusion; that he would have one of such marked talent as that revealed by Mr. Warwick Deeping, comes as a distinct surprise. *Uther and Igraine*, Mr. Deeping's first novel, is a book which may be conveniently classified as falling midway between *The Forest Lovers* and *Richard-Yea-and-Nay*. It has much of the idyllic charm of Mr. Hewlett's earlier story; but it blends with it a good deal of the virile strength and the impetuosity of his later manner. The basis of Mr. Deeping's story is the legend of Uther Pendragon, the fabled father of King Arthur, who, according to the Arthurian cycles, loved one Igraine, wife of Gorlois, and won her by fraud, through the wiles of Merlin, afterwards making her his wife when Gorlois had been slain. Mr. Deeping takes some bold liberties with the old tale; but this will hardly matter, since to those who once fall under the spell of *Uther and Igraine*, Mr. Deeping's version will henceforth be the only true version, his Uther and his Igraine the only ones who are real. The story opens upon a scene of carnage and destruction. Hordes of barbarian invaders are burning and pillaging Saxon vilages; a convent has been rifled, and the frightened nuns are escaping to the woods, fleeing from death and worse, like a covey of startled quail. Igraine, a novice, alone keeps her head, and sacrifices herself to cover their flight. But she is seized by the invaders, stripped, bound to a tree, and left to her fate. It is thus, in the woods, at night, that Uther of the Dragon comes upon her, looses her bonds, leaves her to resume her nun's grey gown, and then undertakes to see her safely bestowed with her kinsmen at Winchester. Misled by the grey gown, he thinks her, not the novice that she is, but a holy nun, placed by her vows forever beyond his reach. And she, not knowing what manner of man he is, welcomes the protection that his mistake affords, and does not enlighten him. "The Way to Winchester" is the sub-title of the earlier half of the story; one wishes it might have been chosen as the name of the book. For it is on the way to Winchester that the great events of the story have their origin, in the love that is kindled in the hearts of the novice and the knight. And because she knows that she loves him, Igraine decides, as they lie for the last night of their journey, almost within sight of Winchester, that on the morrow she will tell him the truth, that she is no nun. And because he loves her, and is jealous of his knightly honour, he decides as he guards her sleep

throughout that last night, that he must see her no more. And so before dawn of the day when she would have told him the truth he steals softly away and passes out of her life. The idyllic charm of the story is undeniable. There is at times a certain mannerism, a root of affectation approaching preciosity. Yet in the later part of the story, which is full of the din of battle, there is an impetuous on-rush of action that makes one quite forget any occasional artificiality of style. It is a book strong enough to carry with it a conviction that here is a new writer whose work will count for something definite among the novels of the present decade.

Frederic Taber Cooper.