THE CRITIC OF DOSTOEVSKY

STILL LIFE. *By J. Middleton Murry. 12mo. 464 pages. E. P. Dutton and Company. $2.50.*

THE THINGS WE ARE. *By J. Middleton Murry. 12mo. 320 pages. E. P. Dutton and Company. $2.50.*

IN Still Life Mr Murry gives us: an English, critic's, version in novel form, of England's own particularly highly sophisticated type of post-war, out-of-nowhere-into-nothingness, the book ending with one lost hysterical soul weeping in perfect iambs. In The Things We Are Mr Murry seems to have undergone an idyllic reaction against his own previous effort, and in expiation steers a mysteriously awakened Mr Boston into a wife, and the company of wholesome, big-bosomed Mrs Williams. And to our astonishment and shamefaced confusion, just when the lovers have been united, this very Mrs Williams comes into the room and places a steaming pudding on the table. Which makes one feel that if we are to preserve Mr Murry as a Platonist we must maintain the balance between dualities by throwing one of his novels on each side of the scale, and letting the bitterness of the one counterbalance the sweetness of the other.

As a portrait of English society, I am willing to take Mr Murry as gospel. The sterile self-analyses in Still Life, the futile conversations, the almost vulgar self-consciousness: it has always been my fond belief that contemporary drawing-room England is precisely that. Yet, building upon this fundament, Mr Murry has contrived to wind up a story with a positively astonishing skill. For the first seven or eight chapters we follow him as he takes on one responsibility after another; but unfortunately, once Mr Murry has finished winding up his story, there is nothing to do but let it run down. Before the story is finished every last one of the characters has told us far too much about himself; and for the last hundred pages they are nothing but voices. Still, these statements are unfair; as they make no allowance for the really keen strokes which Mr Murry keeps turning up continually, and for the discretion and freshness with which the old triangle theme is handled.

But The Things We Are, as I have said, starts out very plainly to supply the antidote to Still Life. Mr Boston, far from deluging us with self-analyses, is an unusually rigid and silenced man, a man in whom all impressions lie buried and unuttered. Then suddenly, about half-way through the book, Mr Boston begins to unbend; he acquires a virulent attack of normality, goes out among good wholesome people, picks up a couple of buns, falls in love with a girl, and analyses himself as expertly as though he had been at it all his life, or as though he had been carried over bodily from Mr Murry's earlier novel. Thus, there are simply two Mr Bostons: one is made to feel the potentialities of this first Boston, and to see the second Boston kinetically, but one does not feel that the potential energy of the first Boston is the kinetic energy of the second. The accepted methods of effecting a character's rejuvenation are (a) to have him meet a Salvation Army lass, or (b) to have him awakened by the war. Mr Murry's invention of simply having the character rejuvenated is more cautious, perhaps, but no more contenting.

On taking up these books of Mr Murry's one automatically returns to the question of Dostoevsky. Mr Murry, to be sure, has done a remarkably thorough job at making the Russian less uncouth and reducing his frenzy to the proportions proper to an English drawing-room; but the principle underlying both authors is the same. It calls, I think, for a distinction between the psychology of form and the psychology of subject-matter. Or between the psychologism of Dostoevsky and the psychologism of, say, a Greek vase. By the psychology of subject-matter I mean, I believe, what Mrs Padraic Colum has defined as information, or science. She might as well have called it journalism. Journalism, science, biographical gossip . . . this movement of almost pure information has had a tremendous effect on modern aesthetics. Thanks to it, far too much emphasis is laid upon the documentary value of the work of art, upon art as a revelational function. We find both Mr Matthew Josephson and Mr Burton Rascoe, for instance, objecting to Joyce because there are more psychoanalytic facts to be obtained from the reading of Kraft-Ebbing or Freud than from Ulysses. And I trust soon to hear these Messrs objecting to Cézanne because his paintings do not contain nearly so much data on trees as can be found in a bulletin of the Forestry Department.

The point is that the problem of the artist lies elsewhere, and that the novel after Dostoevsky has given too much attention to the document. The document *per se*, being neither beautiful nor unbeautiful, falls into quite another plane of considerations from purely aesthetic ones. And if Dostoevsky must stand for his revelations of the human soul, then he stands as nothing other than a scientist who was improperly trained in scientific methods of presentation, and who gave us consequently a hodgepodge rather than a schematization. One might have thought that the peculiarly vigorous flourishing of science would have served rather to purge literature of any documentary obligations, just as the perfection of photography has brought about a similar release in painting. But instead, literature was swept into a sympathetic movement, and science became a burden rather than an instrument of liberation.

Perhaps, to define unescapably just how I should distinguish between the psychology of form and the psychology of subject-matter, I should pin myself to a specific illustration. We read, then, in The Things We Are:

". . . Bettington felt sad. It seemed to him that at the moment when he knew his friend, his friend was embarking on a great journey with him, a journey more dangerous perhaps, but far more wonderful than his own. It was too much. To have to say two farewells at the same moment was more than he could bear, more than he ought to bear; and besides, there was a strange envy in his heart. He must confess it.

" 'I envy you . . . old man. I can't help it; I try not to.'

" 'I wonder you don't hate me as well.'

" 'No, I don't hate you . . . I don't think I do. Why should I? I don't feeling you're taking Felicia away from me. The more I think about her, the more I know she wasn't mine. But envy, yes. I'm afraid it goes pretty deep, too.' After a minute he added," et cetera.

Perhaps the author has established whether it is hate or envy. But I take liberty to assure the reader that he will not care. The information is there; but the issue hardly seems a contribution to beauty. Of course, I do not deny that even this sort of information

could have been made beautiful, especially if—in the truest sense—it had been made more intense. But it would have been the intensity, and not the fact, which was beautiful. The accurate definition of an idea is beautiful—as in Spinoza. The accurate solution of a problem is beautiful—which doubtless explains why Euclid was included among the humanities. And which obviously suggests defining beauty as the shortest distance between two points. But there is also the functional side to beauty, and fortunately Mr Murry has given a very fine instance of it, which I quote from Still Life to illustrate the psychology of form:

"Above them Anne began to sing, low enough to be singing to herself. She could hear that they were not talking, and she crooned. But the house was so still, beneath the regular beat of the rain between the gusts, that they could hear her when her voice rose above a low humming. Neither knew what she was singing.

" 'Does Anne often sing like that?' said Dennis, almost whispering.

" 'How do you mean, "like that"?' Maurice [Anne's lover] hardly understood the question. Then something familiar in the sound came vaguely into his memory. 'I don't know. Yes, she does sometimes. But not often. . . . At least, I don't think so. . . . I don't know.' "

It is, quite plainly, the functional value which counts here. Mr Murry has given us a mechanism of beauty. A programme is officially announced; a blare of trumpets has been sounded. Similarly in Macbeth when the porter scene follows the murder scene this is no documentary *coup*, but a purely functional one. Writing in the Dostoevsky tradition, however, one underrates this really primary quality of art, and—in Mr Murry's case, at least—attains it too seldom.

The making of this lengthy distinction, I feel, is justified in that it attempts to get at the exact quality of diffuseness which makes Mr Murry's books a bit dissatisfying.

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