CASUAL REFLECTIONS ON A FEW OF THE YOUNGER ENGLISH NOVELISTS

BY AMY LOWELL

When I was a girl I used to read, in Mrs. Gaskell's "Life of Charlotte Brontë", of the large boxes of books sent her by the publisher William Smith Williams, and of her comments upon them. Such a pleasant custom seemed, however, to belong to the leisurely days of fifty years ago, and if I had pondered the matter at all, I should have found it as quaint, and agreeable, and bygone, as Chelsea teapots or frilled and layered valentines. It was during the dull days of convalescence after an operation that I learnt that chivalrous consideration may still be a part of the equipment of publishers, even of young and rousingly up-to-date publishers.

One morning, one of those torpid mornings which only people on the delaying high road of recovery are doomed to experience, there arrived a large box of books. Books which were "not for review", so ran the sympathetic inscription. Books just to read, sent from a publisher to a writer! The idea had a pungency; the books must be read.

Now I have an inconvenient reading soul; it picks and chooses to suit itself, with no regard to my mental requirements and still less to the sensibilities of kind donors. Many a time has this reading soul of mine put me to immense embarrassment by refusing to have anything to do with some volume that I ought to read, that, perchance, is a gift from the author and I *must* read, but which it simply and hopelessly ignores. "All in good time", says my soul, and perhaps in six months I find myself devouring the book with gusto. Perhaps, and perhaps not. Some books never get read, I admit it to my shame, but really that is no fault of mine, I am simply at the mercy of this singularly obstinate other fellow.

But the circumstances of my "not for review" package were intriguing. Although not without misgivings, I cut the string, and fell over head and ears into the society of a group of the younger English novelists. It is of no use for the instructed reader to sniff that I should have read them before; of course I should. But the fact remains that for the most part I had not. Ah, but if I am procrastinating, I am also insatiable. That first package was followed by another, and afterwards I pursued my quarry alone. The following weeks remain in my mind as a blur of young writing England. I forget how I got well. I think I left my room and once more entered the world of men when I had put down the last volume. I certainly owe a debt of gratitude to Messrs. Gilbert Cannan, John D. Beresford, Compton Mackenzie, Frank Swinnerton, Stephen McKenna, and last, but by no means to me least, Dorothy Richardson.

A year or so ago, Mrs. Katherine Fullerton Gerould wrote a paper on some of the English novelists, in which she said (I quote from hearsay, not having read her article) that they were all alike and very dull. I agree

that they are alike, so alike that that alone is matter of comment, but dull, no; to me they are anything but dull, since I finished their books and very few modern novels hold my attention long enough for that.

I suppose that it is their reverence for truth, that strange awe of fact which we have learnt from the Russians, not entirely to our advantage, which keeps these young writers so steadily to one theme. They dress it up and set it about on the canvas of their experience, but it is the same old subject after all, dearest of all human subjects, the inexhaustible theme of self. In how large a proportion of the novels is the hero a young writer striving to make a place in literature, combating London lodging-houses, breaking through the snares of pretty ladies, subsisting upon an inconsiderable number of shillings per week, and tending his soul as though it were a hothouse flower! The period clashes past him like the 'busses beneath his window; contiguous persons, as typical as he is himself, impinge upon his progress; social evolutions, like so many squares of Alice's looking-glass chequer-board, contain him and pass him on with whatever effect may be. There are no plots in these splendid young novels, there are only men; but I, being also a modern, greatly prefer this, since I find life more interesting than mechanism and emotion more important than ingenuity.

Well, here we have it, the great reason for the sameness of these young men with one another, and the difference of all of them from the novelists, not only of the Victorian era, but of the generation just older than themselves. The novel of plot was succeeded by the novel of sociology; the novel of sociology has given way to the novel of individuality. Now, the experience of young writing persons being a good deal like the experiences of other young writing persons, the stage for these various egos is very much the same. They differ as green and blue plums differ, and not in the least as plums differ from barberries. Mrs. Gerould perhaps does not like plums, and, craving oranges and apples and pomegranates, finds an exclusively plum diet monotonous. But, granted a weakness for this very fruit, there is enough range in taste and color to make a dish of them excellent eating.

Let us take a few characters at random. There is Mr. Cannan's Mendel, the artist Jew beating against a world of Gentiles; Mr. Beresford's Jacob Stahl, the German Jew hybridized upon an Englishman, a writer this time, crowded by both poverty and tradition; Mr. Mackenzie's Michael Fane, priggish æsthete stunted by the necessity for exertion, the victim of his own consciousness of effort; Mr. McKenna's David O'Rane thrusting himself down the throat of convention; Mr. Swinnerton's Velancourt choked by the realization of an unsympathetic world; Miss Richardson's Miriam Henderson, a strange combination of young exuberance and bitter introspection.

This is all the fruit of one tree, running the gamut from succulence to shrivel. For here is an art of *nuances,* shades are the important things, a half an angle makes an entire story.

One cannot help wondering, as one reads these books, whether the writers of the present age really lead a more circumscribed life than their elders of the Victorian era. With what unanimity is London the background for these stories! Slight ex-

cursions into the country, mostly the home counties as in "Plasher's Mead", serve as the only relief. Dickens himself was not more cockney, but Dickens was a sort of *genius loci;* his London was subsoiled with folk-lore and surfaced with the personality of place. In the new books, London is a painted drop-scene; as an entity, it is scarcely to be observed.

For a change, the characters occasionally dash over to Paris for a week or so, and do all the regulation things proper to young artists in the Latin Quarter of fiction, but usually they stay very much put in their London flats and lodging-houses.

It is the same with class as with place. These are tales of the *bourgeoisie,* with side dips into Bohemia and the slums. The upper classes are, for the most part, arrogantly ignored. The books are redolent of a naïve snobbishness. Well did Thackeray write a "Book of Snobs". Snobbishness is the fly in the amber of English greatness. In a recent English autobiography this remarkable passage from a letter appears, quoted apparently with entire satisfaction:

> It is pleasant indeed to see his dear face, and to find him always so affectionate, and so unspoiled by his being so much sought after in a kind of society entirely different from anything we can enter into.

This in 1850; but the author goes on to comment, almost wonderingly, on the "simple kindness" of "time saved, day after day, for an invalid sister, by a run-after young man of twenty-seven". This sort of thing is horrible; it could not go on. But yet one feels that the now thoroughly submerged upper classes would be justified in exclaiming:

> Perhaps it was right to dissemble your love
> But why did you kick me down-stairs?

The Victorians toadied to the upper classes, the Georgians snub them; but in neither one case nor the other is there that simple acceptance of a social fact that one would like to see. It is hard for English and Americans to understand each other, and surely the base of this misunderstanding lies just here. The feudal system has broken down in bitterness, and, looking on, one can only say, "Alas!" and pass by. Democracy means the equality to admit inequalities without rancor. Which one of the nations is democratic? America used to be; is it now?

I digress; but one always digresses in reading, and, after all, overtones are what make the mellowness of literature. How many books one reads which remain always and only themselves. These young Englishmen stretch the mind on, and out, and far back, and forward. One reflection leads to another. I have no intention here of resolving the tangle; I have been content to wonder at the knots.

Perhaps I ought at once to disarm the meticulous reader by admitting that this is an eighteenth century essay. I am taking no account of those pigeon-holing tactics so carefully learnt from Germany in the days before the war. I have a great admiration for the qualities of Anglo-Saxon genius, and I care very little for the efforts of some of our writers to divert it from its proper channels. By all means let us steal and graft from other literatures, but, also, do let us be sure that the stem is our own. A very pretty flower can be got from a slip of French, Italian, or Spanish stock. Oriental varieties flourish not too badly on our native soil. But the Russian genius is inimical to us. Their dour fatalism is alien to us in every way; buds with a tendency to dry-rot

before flowering are hardly worth encouragement. And this tendency to dry-rot is rather painfully noticeable in some of these writers, particularly in Mr. Cannan and in Mr. Beresford, I should say. For one thing, their books are too long; for another, they are almost devoid of humor. Take that gem, Mr. Swinnerton's "Nocturne", and mark its swiftness and clarity. As far as the pure art of writing is concerned, this volume is certainly head and shoulders above the rest.

But there are two books to which these criticisms of narrowness of place and environment do not apply. I refer to Mr. McKenna's "Sonia" and Mr. Mackenzie's "Sylvia Scarlett".

"Sonia" is frankly a novel of the upper classes, and the upper classes treated without a hint of snobbishness. It is gracefully, charmingly written, in a style which must be called distinguished; but it is a little old-fashioned, the recent old-fashioned of day before yesterday. It is the story of a man, and so far it belongs to the individual school; but the man, David O'Rane, is interested in uplifting the world, and with this idea we step back into the practice of a decade ago. The book is a bit inconsequential; the minor characters, even Sonia Dainton, blurringly drawn. The story seems constructed only to throw up the figure of O'Rane, who dominates it much in the manner of the portraits of seventeenth century generals plastered in herculean proportions upon a background of diminutive battles. The story is a little slow in action, somewhat loosely knit in construction. O'Rane reaches no conclusion, neither does the author; the volume ends with a question-mark, and by that question-mark we are very much back in the year of our Lord 1917.

Mr. McKenna's second book, "Ninety-Six Hours' Leave", must cause those who take their literature over seriously great pain. It is a trifle, and such a bubbling, effervescing trifle. Such spirits are in the true line of Anglo-Saxon genius. It is written in a style quite free from mannerisms, and with a nice dash to it. The matter is slight and quaint, and had the author's invention held out as exuberantly to the end of the book as the beginning promised—it doesn't. The end flattens rather splay-footedly. Still the book is a fine bit of joking, and in a new vein for the young and serious "intelligentsia". We hope that Mr. McKenna will go on, pruning up his plots until they have the distinction of his manner of writing them. The question-mark is all very well when it rounds a philosophy; it is scarcely so happy a colophon when it applies to literary construction. Still, Mr. McKenna and Mr. Mackenzie are the only ones of these novelists in whom the excellent vein of English humor seems to be in a flourishing condition. If only the war has purged literature of adolescent spleen! Tragedy and humor are healthy, but moon-calf melancholy is scarcely robust enough as a sentiment upon which to found a great literary revival. And that this is a genuine literary revival, I think there can be no doubt, although it is too early to measure its dimensions.

Robustness and humor are by no means lacking in Mr. Mackenzie's last book, "Sylvia Scarlett". Here is that curious anomaly in twentieth century fiction, the picaresque novel. We can trace the line down directly through "Don Quixote", "Rabelais", "Gil Blas", "Le Capitaine Fracasse", etc.

It is a *genre* of the rarest growth in English literature. Butler's "Hudibras" might come under that head, with certain reservations; and so might Borrow's "Lavengro" and "The Romany Rye"; but perhaps the purest example is Sterne's "A Sentimental Journey". It is a distinctly modern twist to make the hero a woman. Sylvia Scarlett is far and away the most original character drawn by any of these young writers, if we except the grotesquerie of "The Wonder" by Mr. Cannan; but the poor deformed monstrosity who goes by that name can hardly be called a "character" at all. He is a ghastly phenomenon, finely imagined and presented, more subtly horrible than any of Hoffmann's figures, but no more than they to be ranked with the real personalities of literature. Sylvia Scarlett is as absolute as Hamlet, and she moves with the same inevitable freedom from control. Once having conceived her, Mr. Mackenzie was obliged to let her act as she would. That is the charm of her and of the book; in no other of these novels is there the same sense of life and inevitable action. The story rushes along from adventure to adventure, held in place by the singularly gallant and lovable personality of the heroine. Some shallow critics, with a strange lack of understanding, have spoken of the book as "disgusting". The innate purity of Sylvia, presented without a trace of sentimentality, apparently makes no appeal to these hurried and case-hardened souls. Had Sylvia been a goody-goody, they would have understood; the unconventional invariably blurs the vision of stereotyped minds.

And the humor! The delicious, light, pathetic humor! Here is something which could never have been done in just this way before the present century. Where the older novelists would have been maudlin or vulgar, Mr. Mackenzie is firm and sympathetic. Take the scene in the churchyard, with poor lonely little Sylvia writing her epitaph:

> "Here lies Sylvia Scarlett, who was always running away. If she has to live all over again and be the same girl, she accepts no responsibility for anything that may occur." She printed this on a piece of paper, fastened it to a twig, and stuck it into the earth to judge the effect.

This is certainly exceedingly funny from one angle, even robustly funny, but how lonely it is too. There is our era, and the reason for the force of the book.

The South American scenes are excellent—violent, rattling—with the flame that is Sylvia somehow purging the whole in a clean fire. What shall one say of those people who do not see this? What indeed; except that one gets out of a book in proportion to what one is capable of putting in.

In the end, when Sylvia has been abandoned by the man she trusted, the inevitable question-mark of our age is repeated in a blare of unconquered trumpets:

> At the last moment, in searching through her trunks, she found the yellow shawl that was wrapped round her few treasures of ancestry. She was going to leave it behind, but on second thought she packed it in the only trunk she took with her. She was going back perhaps to the life of which these treasures were the only solid pledge.
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> "This time, yes, I'm off with the ragglety-taggle gipsies in deadly earnest. Charing Cross", she told the taxi-driver.

A book indeed. In many ways, a very great book. Jumbled, as all Mr. Mackenzie's books are, but with hints of a width and freedom utterly foreign to his contemporaries. "Carnival" and "Sinister Street" gave Mr. Mackenzie his reputation, but "Sylvia Scarlett" tops them easily. Where they are confused and incoherent, this

volume holds the chord of a contained personality, and the episodes, many though these be, fall into a lucid place because of their relation to it. Had Mr. Mackenzie been able to give the same reality to the characters of his other books, the effect might have been the same in them. But where Michael Fane and the others live as clever creations of an artist's brain, Sylvia Scarlett exists with the separateness of something not conceived, but known and recorded. An achievement this; and with it Mr. Mackenzie stretches ahead of Mr. Cannan, Mr. Beresford, and Mr. McKenna. Only Mr. Swinnerton, in "Nocturne", and Miss Richardson, on rare occasions, can approach this consummation.

My recollection of Mr. Beresford sees his work as a long and rather level line of story. I suppose the up-to-date reader will be horrified if I say that he interests in much the same way that Trollope does. All his traditions of novel-writing are diametrically opposed to Trollope's, of course, and yet there is an ambling sameness which forces the comparison. The analytical method had not been discovered in Trollope's day, but many of its best results are imbedded in his work. I recommend anyone who has never done so to read "He Knew He Was Right", for here is one of the most masterly presentations of the slow oncoming of insanity to be found in all literature. Life is not the only thing which has taken on a new interpretation in these last years; if ever anything needed a new consideration and appraisement it is the mass of Victorian writing. But I am off after another butterfly and must regain the road and Mr. Beresford.

"God's Counterpoint" is less subdued than the Jacob Stahl trilogy. Mr. Beresford's tram-car is off the level of cobbles into a wider country. The change is grateful, but even this book, which has seemed so daring to certain observers, opens up again a question which has intruded between the covers of each of these books in turn, of each and of all of them, by whomsoever written. What makes these young men so pruriently prudish? Their reticencies are drawn so sharply that one cannot help suspecting an obscene thought behind. Is the outspoken slime of James Joyce and others of his kidney responsible for this self-consciousnes? Nakedness is more modest than an obviously chosen drapery. These young men choose dangerous subjects and drape them to pass the censor, but one could wish for a finer and more noble simplicity of treatment. Thomas Hardy has shown us the way. Are we too small to follow in his footsteps?

The greatest limitation of these men is their subject-matter. In "On the Staircase", Mr. Swinnerton makes one of his characters say:

> The modern writer, like the modern composer, is poor in thematic material. He accordingly occupies his talent with atmosphere.

Yet I should say that atmosphere, save in the realm of psychology, was rather singularly lacking in most of these books. We have the atmosphere of mental states certainly, but the persons move, as it were, against a background of neutral-tinted screens. Quite modern this, quite in keeping with the practice of our present-day stage settings, but a bit dissatisfying to a colorist, and already the vogue is *vieux jeu.* For, in Miss Richardson's three novels: "Pointed Roofs", "Backwater", and "Honeycomb", there is a new technique. The answer lies in a somewhat singular phenomenon: these authors are novelists and novelists alone. Not one of

them, with the exception of Miss Richardson, is blessed, or cursed, with a particle of the poet's vision or point of view. I can hardly think of a group of writers who are so completely prose-thoughted. Compare their treatment with that of George Meredith and Thomas Hardy, for instance; compare it even to that of Dickens, a master poet of place and weather. Mr. Swinnerton gives us descriptions, Mr. Mackenzie in "Plasher's Mead" has pleasant pages teeming with country flowers, but these are written in prose. They are prose-conceived and prose-presented. Miss Richardson, on the other hand, has something of the poet's sensuous delight in mere seeing, and, with this, much of the poet's originality of presentation. Compare any passage in any of these authors to this in "Honeycomb":

1

The West End street . . . grey buildings rising on either side, feeling away into the approaching distance—angles sharp against the sky . . . softened angles of buildings against other buildings . . . high moulded angles soft as crumbs, with deep undershadows . . . creepers fraying from balconies . . . strips of window blossoms across the buildings, scarlet, yellow, high up; a confusion of lavender and white pouching out along a dipping sill . . . a wash of green creeper up a white painted house front . . . patches of shadow and bright light . . . Sounds of visible near things streaked and scored with broken light as they moved, led off into untraced distant sounds . . . chiming together.

2

Wide golden streaming Regent Street was quite near. Some near narrow street would lead into it.

3

Flags of pavement flowing along—smooth clean grey squares and oblongs, faintly polished, shaping and drawing away—sliding into each other . . . I am part of the dense smooth clean paving stone . . . sunlit; gleaming under dark winter rain; shining under warm sunlit rain, sending up a fresh stony smell . . . always there . . . dark and light . . . dawn, stealing . . .

4

Life streamed up from the close dense stone. With every footstep she felt she could fly.

5

The little dignified high-built cut-through street, with its sudden walled-in church, swept round and opened into brightness and a clamour of central sounds ringing harshly up into the sky.

6

The pavement of heaven.
To walk along the radiant pavement of sunlit Regent Street forever.

Mr. Randolph Bourne, the brilliant young critic whose recent death has so saddened his contemporaries, was the first to point out that Miss Richardson's work was imagistic. Since then, many reviewers have enlarged upon the fact. This is quite obviously true, but whether Miss Richardson learnt the method from the practice of current poetry, or whether, as I incline to believe, it is in the air, no one who does not know Miss Richardson herself can determine.

It is the same with the narrative as with its setting. It is conceived from the outside in, as it were, which is eminently imagistic. How often have not I, personally, been accused of presenting the greater by the less, a method which baffles many people apparently, and which they decry as proving a desire on my part to belittle moments and events of significance? And yet this very apperception of fact through its circumferences is the method of life. How do we apprehend love, for instance? Is it not by the thousand little trivial things that love does? How patriotism? By the files of boys in khaki marching past our windows, by the new hat we forego to purchase a liberty bond, by little printed words on

the page of a newspaper. The great emotions, the great events, are all made discernible to us by a myriad infinitesimal, trifling touches. It is a convention to record them in the large, for they can only have reached us through the bewilderingly small. Imagism knows this and calls it "suggestion"; Miss Richardson knows it, and has written three remarkable novels by the light of her knowledge. They have puzzled some readers, others have found in them a rare and invigorating freedom for the pursuit of truth. May Sinclair says:

> To me these three novels show an art and method and form carried to punctilious perfection.

And again:

> It is as if no other writers had ever used their senses so purely and with so intense a joy in their use.
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> This intensity is the effect of an extreme concentration on the thing seen or felt . . . Her novels are novels of an extraordinary compression and an extenuation more extraordinary still.

Mr. Beresford, in his introduction to "Pointed Roofs", announces that he has read "Pilgrimage" (the generic title of the whole work of which all three volumes are but parts) three times, and goes on to say that he is only afraid of annoying both critics and public by "a superabundant eulogy". So much for the judgment of others of the craft. But both Miss Sinclair and Mr. Beresford tangle themselves up in discussions of realism and idealism, in hair-splitting agonies as to whether Miss Richardson's art is "objective" or "subjective". With much travail, an unexpected thought is finally born to each; namely, that the book is at once realistic and romantic, that the subjective method must include the objective. The proverbial camel struggling to squeeze through the needle's eye can have encountered scarcely more difficulty in transit than these excellent *prose* novelists in their attempt to follow the special swiftness of the *poetical* novelist. I pointed out in my "Tendencies in Modern American Poetry" that this fusion of realism and romanticism, so ardently striven for by Heine, was the very stock in trade, or better, the vital aim, of modern poetry. And, behold, a novelist great enough to see life whole and indivisible! Do let us have done with "kultur" and treat, even art, with crass common-sense. As Mr. Quiller-Couch says: realism never wrote anything, it was so-and-so. Miss Richardson, being a woman and not a formula, writes with the whole of herself. We are all realists, some of us are poets; Miss Richardson is both, as a balanced artist should be, and, so being, is English to the core as neither Mr. Cannan nor Mr. Beresford can ever hope to be. The formula has ensnared them, can they ever escape?

Even when the specific aim of these writers is to portray the artistic character, as Mr. Cannan attempts to do in "Mendel", for instance, it is rather the external mannerisms that are given than the spirit which informs them. I have said that it is only by external touches that one can apprehend an internal fact. But to the artist that fact must be obvious and absorbing, for, failing comprehension in himself, these touches are of no more account than so many particles of dust. Mr. Cannan and Mr. Swinnerton deal glibly with schools and manners, but always as recording journalists. Why? I think because the method, being based on a misconception, breaks just here, the formula clamps down on any farther-reaching comprehension; or, if one prefers, the limitations of the men themselves

have been raised to the dignity of a canon of art.

Henry James speaks of these young authors as "saturated" in the realities of their subject; but Mr. Beresford, with a finer understanding, says that Miss Richardson alone has really "plunged". To drop the guiding strings of cant and splash in, is what is wanted; and, seeing this, most of these men appear rather to be shivering after a knee-deep dip. For art is virile, it requires an awful and never failing energy. Nothing is so exhausting as creative invention. I believe that the reason so many drop by the way is more because the necessary vitality is lacking to them than through a paucity of talent. The sentimental has gone, thank goodness! But it is a confession of inability to permit a negative to rule one's art. With all the knowledge of their craft which these young men superabundantly possess, one sees them writing always with eyes nervously fixed upon a gigantic "Thou shalt not!"

The truth is what we are already beginning to feel is a truism too trite for expression, but which must be expressed here if these writers are to be understood. The social order is breaking up under our noses. It had begun before the war, but what was a slow crumbling has become an avalanche. These books stand midway between two stabilities. One we know, for it is past; the other we believe must be. They are shifting and uncertain as the time is uncertain. They have no boldness of invention because the sources of invention, the array of customs and manners which make up any contemporary life, are for the moment clogged. They hesitate and grope, and only in this trilogy of Miss Richardson's do we fall again into anything like a sure stride, and even here the stride is only sure by comparison. The time has got these authors by the throat. Mr. Cannan attempts escape through cynicism; Mr. Beresford shuts his eyes and darkens the windows of his laboratory; Mr. McKenna whistles and collates old prints; Mr. Swinnerton sets his face and plods ahead with bulldog heroism and pathos; Mr. Mackenzie drinks a toast "to the next man that dies"; but Miss Richardson opens the window and insists that since the sun is still shining it is better to notice the fact and get what good we may.

Gallant souls; sincere artists; these are the stuff of which literary revivals are made. Your era may have gone down under the guns, but you will always be that era and perhaps a new one as well.