

# ENGLISH NOVELS—FROM AN AMERICAN STANDPOINT

*Reflections on Ourselves While Reading Swinnerton, Ford, Nichols,  
Arlen and H. D.*

By Gorham B. Munson

IT HAS been said that very often English reviewers look at books by Americans not just as books but as *American* books. I propose here to turn the tables and examine five novels not simply as such but peculiarly as *English* novels. For the English attitude toward our letters—there are plenty of exceptions to it, enough almost to presage a general change in English readers—is incredulous and patronizing: American writers are upstarts and it is not conceivable that they should bear themselves well in service to the Muses. And Heaven knows that there are enough provincial blunders daily committed “over here” to confirm the lettered Englishman in his opinion. He is interested in Poe, let us say, and reads the books Americans have written for or against or about that moon-struck figure: three out of five amaze him by their fantasticality.

But we are learning to pay off British snobbery with a snobbery of our own. We—particularly the younger of us—are fond of saying that English literature has become devitalized. We affect the scorn of the exuberant and living for the weak and the dead. This is, no doubt, a crude enthusiasm for our native writers, but it is also very interesting as a symptom. It signifies that an American point of view is emerging.

Leaving that point of view quite undefined for the moment, let us see what it is we hate in contemporary English fiction. I fancy that it is just such novels as *A Brood of Ducklings*, by Frank Swinnerton (Doubleday, Doran, \$2.50). Here it is: that well-bred drone which the *Times Literary Supplement* might commend as a “quiet style”, that fussy agitation about mild breaches of good form, that slow pace of construction,

that indulgent point of view that distends itself to take in sympathetically the doings of the young folks, and, oh, those shadowy, refined gentlemen and those dabs of quaintness—in short, here is the hush of sterile brooding over life. *A Brood of Ducklings* is the story of an old-fashioned widower's adoration for his two daughters and how their love affairs baffled him and subdued him and finally gave him relief. All is forgiven and the father sets forth to see the world; and the author has blended Victorianism and the new ethos. But I shall remember the novel not for that, but for striking so perfectly an average in English literary production, for exemplifying so wearisomely the duller modes of English thought and feeling.

Well! My frank venting of dislike should, no doubt, be corrected but there is at times need for an appropriate injustice in criticism, and I am indulging myself for the sake of clarifying the American viewpoint. That viewpoint is based on the belief that the power of initiative in Western culture has passed to America. The center of creative energy is here. And energy—in style, in motive, in outlook—is precisely what we miss in Mr. Swinnerton and his peers. But, of course, leisured, prudent, quietistic writing does not make up all of British letters, as we sometimes need to remind ourselves, and as *A Little Less Than Gods*, by Ford Madox Ford (Viking, \$2.50), illustrates.

Another recent English novel that raises our eyes away from the dead level is *Under the Yew or the Gambler Transformed*, by Robert Nichols (Covici, Friede, \$2.00). From these writers we may estimate what we lose in our own current letters time and time again, and that is the advantages of

inheriting and using a rich and variegated literary tradition. We have, I hope it is granted, the power for assuming leadership, but we have not been taught to lead. We have the creative energy but not the data for spending it. We are, in short, weak in traditions and furthermore unequipped with standards. Thus it is that America is the land of geniuses (Poe, Whitman, Melville) and of badly-trained talents (Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Eugene O'Neill), whereas England shows economy in disciplining and bringing out the most in her men of talent, as witness the burgeoning of Messrs. Ford and Nichols.

The first has written an historical romance of the Hundred Days—from the court at Elba to the Royalist proscriptions after Waterloo. He catches us neatly on that military-hero worshipping side which society makes sure we all possess, and he has the grace to feed our emotions with convincing portrayals of Napoleon; Wellington; Ney, Blücher and the other "demi-gods", including Assheden Smith who is modelled from Thomas Assheden Smith, famous in the annals of Nimrod for his unexcelled riding to hounds. Mr. Ford—it should perhaps go without saying—has a nice sense of style, of situation and of narrative. He makes his characters speak ideally (that is, with a deliberate artifice not possible in the hubbub of actual circumstances) but never stiltedly. His eye is exceptionally good and composes his scenes for him into a vivid formal beauty. And everyone knows—though Mr. Ford does it so expertly it must be mentioned again—that he has smoothly blended the narrative devices of Henry James (the action viewed by a bystander) and of Joseph Conrad (the anticipation of the story and then catching up) into his own technique of construction.

Some of these, and one thing more, can be exemplified in one of the last speeches of Assheden Smith. He has tapped with his riding crop the feet of the figure on a wayside crucifix. "If," he says to George Fielding, "you insist on matching valours with me, put this one first. I will ride through a bullfinch of thorns before any man or devil created; you will cry up your Napoleon marching unarmed and with breast

bared up to hostile troops. But these are the actions of those who are a little less than gods. I would not hang upon a cross in a dark wood, having suffered all that went before; nor yet would Napoleon! Nor yet would he who is—who was—styled the Bravest of the Brave." The one thing more is a sense of proportion.

Mr. Nichols in *Under the Yew* has been as audacious as Mr. Ford. He has undertaken a *tour de force*—to write "a story with a moral" (largely implicit, however) in the manner of the greatest century of English prose, the eighteenth. A single bad slip in vocabulary, tone or idiom would have been fatal to his design, but there are no slips. Many pitfalls has this tale of a young profligate and gambler who in 1786 was ruined in mad play with Sir Anthony Noble, a character who assumes more and more the air of being the Devil, and the ruined young man is confronted by a gruesome, heart-rending pair of phantoms under the yew as he flees homeward and thereafter mends his life; but Mr. Nichols is unerring in keeping out of the pitfalls. The moral is that perfection is to be found within, in a city built without hands, whereas the perfect gambler in the person of Sir Anthony Noble seeks perfection without and finishes as a shabby Mephistopheles.

To recur to my connective theme, I said that we, besides enjoying the books of Messrs. Nichols and Ford, could learn from them the advantages of living in a country with a continuous, powerful and sustaining literary tradition. But this statement requires modification, for in a sense it is now an advantage that traditional moulds are not too firmly set for our energies to flow into. We are, of course, living in a critical period—how critical is a consideration outside the present attempt; but the peculiar thing about our time of crisis is that the traditions available are not valid for our problematical rejuvenescence. Mr. Ford's sense of proportion is but a mere grain of salt, and Mr. Nichols offers a valuable commonplace but not a vital edifice of being in which it acts as cornerstone: in fact, he is more concerned in stirring our literary associations and al-

most achieves quaintness. No, with one exception I do not think it necessary to deplore the weakness of the European traditions of the last two hundred years in our land; and that exception is the tradition of pure craft, the drilling in how to go about the job intelligently which our two authors, and Mr. Swinnerton too, exhibit.

Consider Michael Arlen, a naturalized Englishman, as a workman alone, and the meaning of the foregoing should clear up. He received his early training under that wizard among English editors for bringing writers to birth, A. R. Orage of *The New Age*. From him he learned to prune the "natural" out of his style and make it all artifice, an opium dream style, a fashion-style. With this Mr. Arlen did precisely what he wanted to and, now that it has served its turn, he is refurbishing his instrument. *Lily Christine*, by Michael Arlen (Doubleday, Doran, \$2.50) is the proof that he intends to manifest his other potentialities as a writer. This is the story of a "good woman" in that she is essentially faithful in love and friendship and she has in her own words, "What a life!" For her friends are "incapables" and her husband is a cad who appalls us the more in that Mr. Arlen makes us see that the cad's "fate was to get what he wanted and to be defeated in his soul". The end of *Lily Christine* is pathetic and so very skilfully handled by Mr. Arlen that no one hereafter can despise his ability as an *artist*. No, no one need blush to acknowledge a liking for Arlen in this book. If he

has no standards, he is shrewdly civilized, and his cynicism needs to be swallowed.

H. D., also naturalized in England, has profited less than Mr. Arlen. Where he has acquired ease, range and vivacity, in addressing the reader, she continues to be tightly circumscribed in style and subject and appeal, and to strain for an intensity which is less often present in her prose than in her verse. *Hedylus*, by H. D. (Houghton Mifflin, \$4.50) is not so much caviar as a poorly cooked common honest dessert. Her theme—the emotional complications of a minor Greek poet toward his mother (one of the *hetærae*), his unknown father and a former lover of his mother—is no more difficult or precious than Mr. Arlen's theme. But it is treated in a jagged tedious style with much pretence at "beauty" and much sentimentalism about the craft of letters.

I would wager that she has not the *spirit* of the writer, whereas Mr. Arlen, whatever one may think of his motives for writing, has that spirit. In the way he goes at his job he is a better example for us who on the whole trust too much to inspiration and who, the more serious we are, the more narrow and precious we incline to be. Yes, the tradition of hard work at communicating the effects we wish to make on readers is the one thing for which we still need to go to school in London. The rest is realizing what we don't know as yet, namely, the responsibilities that must be prepared for and assumed if our possession of creative energy is not to be blindly spilled.

# UNPACKING HEARTS WITH WORDS

By Conrad Aiken

THERE is only one thing to be said in favor of the "group review" of books of verse, especially when the group is as miscellaneous as the present one; and that is the fact that nothing can be so well calculated to sharpen anew one's sense of the predicament which any contemporary poet must face. Here are these five poets—Mr. Robinson, Mr. Jeffers, Mr. Coppard, Mr. Sandburg and Mr. MacLeish; and their very dissimilarity, which is striking, suggests, a good deal, that the contemporary poet is in a sense a lost man. Tradition, which in other ages was precise and dictatorial, is now overwhelmingly complex. Which, of all the traditions he inherits, shall our poet obey? Or shall he endeavor to combine several of them, and of the combination to make something new?

The situation is a difficult one, at best; and one is aware of the difficulty when one reads these five volumes of verse. They are all of them good books, very much above the average. But one feels of all of them that they lack that ultimate power and directness and rootedness which seems, unfortunately, to accrue only to those works which are produced at a time when tradition is great and single and even, perhaps, *simple*. That these five poets feel the *need* of some such sustaining certainty and simplicity is at once obvious. A. E. Coppard, for example, in his *Collected Poems* (Knopf, \$2.50) deliberately goes back to the seventeenth century for his quality, and very charmingly he does it, too. His formal lyrics are admirable: they have the genuine freshness and neatness, the dexterously naive mingling of conceptual and sensory view, which one associates with the best of Cavalier and metaphysical poetry. He has wit, too, and an engaging lustiness. But in thus retreating to an earlier period, he admits himself to be lost; and *how* lost betrays itself in his

other and more modern poems, which as a rule are loose and unsuccessful.

E. A. Robinson, whose collected *Sonnets: 1889-1927* (Macmillan, \$1.50) are now presented to us, plays a little safer, chooses a tradition less remote and odd: his roots are in the nineteenth century; and perhaps his closest congener, in that era, was Meredith. He treats the sonnet formally, a little abstractly, at a low pitch of intensity; he is not much gifted on the sensuous side; there is a kind of Puritan bleakness in him, which rather fortunately blends with his intellectual irony and dry Yankee humor; and if his sonnets never glow, or become radiant, or *melt* into a sort of white-hot integrity, as one feels the best sonnets should, they are nevertheless excellent. One reads them with a genuine pleasure and with a feeling (rare enough in poetry) that one's mind is being employed; but one fails, afterward, to remember them particularly. They are just a little colorless.

Carl Sandburg is another matter. His roots, clearly enough, are in Whitman. On the technical side, in fact, he is the chief of Whitman's disciples; he endeavors to bring Whitman up to date. He has a rich feeling for slang, for the jazz rhythms of the age, a fine "voice", a splendid gusto; if he fails on the whole to satisfy us it is because his *range*—mental or spiritual or emotional, or whatever one wants to call it—is so narrow. He is too persistently sentimental, crooning, nostalgic, yearning. And while he achieves very often a charming effect by his mixture of neologism or slang and sentiment, he does so with insufficient sense of variety and selection. His poems wear out comparatively quickly—partly because they are all too much alike; too much in one key, and partly because, for all their "thickness" (in William James's sense), they contain so little "idea". Of his new book, *Good Morning, America*