

VIEWS OF AN AUTHOR'S VARY WIDELY ON AN INTERESTING TOPIC

OUR PUBLIC MIND IS DIFFERENT, SAYS DOROTHY CANFIELD

What Is Meant by "Straightforward Facing of Realities?" Asks Mr. Whitman—Miss Daviess Is Optimistic.

DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER

When I first read Miss Glasgow's appraisal of the relative literary sincerity in England and America I signed and acquiesced. Now after fuller consideration I find myself saying, "Yes, I suppose it is true in the main about this country, but concerning English conditions I am less positive."

I remember once hearing the wife of a sea captain complain of her lot. "If only I might not be having blessed, daily, hourly intimacy with my dear husband which is the good fortune of most wives," she told me sadly. "Then I feel I should know that marriage really might be. As it is I have missed the finest." The impression made on me by her complaint was deep but not lasting. For a few days later the wife of a well known novelist confided in me. "This stifling intimacy which ensues when one's husband no matter how dear is always in the house—! How often I have envied sailors' wives. They cannot know the tragic stoniness which inevitably accompanies the usual marriage. These reunions after long absence must keep intact the poetry, the high ardor, the fresh splendor of love."

It is always well to refrain from envy until one knows a great deal about the person envied. Remembering those two discontented wives, I wonder whether perhaps to-day in England some woman writes may not be saying wistfully to herself or to an interviewer: "Here in England the great rewards of cash and popularity have always gone to such writers as Hall Caine and Marie Corelli, while in America they take literature seriously. The English version of Jean Christophe has sold three times as much in America as in England. De Morgan's audience is there rather than here. Joseph Conrad's reputation was made there. Meredith was first recognized there. Arnold Bennett's fame came in the first place from America, and he still sells more there than here. Stevenson's great vogue began there. Gilbert Cann, Oliver Onions all the younger school—find real appreciation there. Ah!

By the Author of "The Way of an Eagle," "The Rocks of Valpre," "The Keeper of the Door," "The Knee of Diamonds"

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It taken a fresh young country with its fresh vigor to support what is finest and most serious in literature. I do not at all assert that there is such a woman writer saying such things. But my experience with people and different countries leads me to think it not improbable. Once I traveled in Italy with an aunt who for years had a practice of proclaiming that every American artistically considered, is a barbarian, and every Italian filled to overflowing with art and culture. I felt a malicious satisfaction as I noted the aggrieved and disillusioned amazement she encountered, one after another, in the only colored middle class interiors (quite as bad as anything in the middle West she so abominated), sugar candied Italian carvings, hectic modern Italian monuments. I bore my aunt no ill will. I yielded to no one in my admiration for the Italian genius at its best, but I must confess that it did my heart good to confront her with evidence of the fact that she was wrong. I do not mean to make up a nation of any sort, that the majority of no nation has a cultured artistic taste and that there is not and probably never has been any nation all compact of "art instinct."

The complaint of the artist against middle class taste for presenting it not confined to our country or our time. Mrs. Arnold asked much of his life in voicing it, so did Heine. Was there ever a more of which we are certainly not did not demand cheerful stunts no matter how false? Voltaire's inimitable Candide with its satiric fling at people who insisted that this is the best of all possible worlds, was an open protest against a demand for sugary optimism in eighteenth century France, and eighteenth century France, whatever it may be, is not American in any way. I do not deny that an old, long established civilization like that of England has a more of which we are certainly not did not demand cheerful stunts no matter how false? Voltaire's inimitable Candide with its satiric fling at people who insisted that this is the best of all possible worlds, was an open protest against a demand for sugary optimism in eighteenth century France, and eighteenth century France, whatever it may be, is not American in any way.

The young English school is making an honest effort to describe life exactly as it is. All honor to them. I am convinced that in doing so they are consciously sacrificing the immense popularity which in every country rewards those who cater to popular taste. But they are not in America. Young writers just as honest, just as sincere? Is there any sugary optimism in the fresh minded, vivid energy of H. K. Webster's "The Road Adventure"? Can anybody say that Willa Sibert Cather's "The Song of the Lark," with its fine strength and splendid artistic conviction, was written to capture a public which demands diluted truth? After all, even though it is salutary to realize the mediocrity of our popular taste, our general lack of critical sense, the immense circulation of trash, there is no use of blinding ourselves to the encouraging fact that with all our shortcomings even here in America there is also a public for such good books as these.

No, if some of our young writers lack literary honesty and courage, the reason must be that they value these things less than expensive motor cars and country houses. They choose what they want. It is their affair. The necessities of the American reading public differ in no way from any other reading public that ever existed—except that there is a lot more of it.

STEPHEN WHITMAN To my mind, the force of this accusation depends upon what is meant by a "straightforward facing of realities." To a person or a nation in one state of consciousness reality may mean one thing; to a person or a nation in another state it may mean a different thing. For instance, let us look at "the younger English novelists" and at the American reading public. The younger English novelists, at least such as I have read, are certainly not over-supplied with the optimism that is supposed to be necessary to the American reading public. For one thing their idea of life seems to be depressed by a feeling of unavoidable fate, which perhaps they have unconsciously acquired from their prototypes, the French and Russian realists, or it may be, have extracted from the reflections natural to the young introspective mind. I myself passed through this phase; my first novel was the result of it. So, if I seem in any way to object to the accusation questioned it should largely be said that I am unfitted, from lack of mental experience, to comprehend the accuser's

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Dorothy Canfield Fisher, author of "The Bent Twig" (Holt).

point of view. My present opinion, however, is that the younger English novelists are still deficient in a certain spiritual clairvoyance, and that this deficiency excludes from their vision a whole category of modern human phenomena quite as real as those that they are moved to describe, and more highly typical of their own time. I presume that Faulstich will be mentioned. He was once my ideal, his technical ability still seems to me as fine as ever. But to-day, especially in his "Sentimental Education" which should be the master-pattern for many a young English novelist—he disappoints me, better cause not in that long book has been a mere dream of hope. It is a constant preoccupation with the more ignominious human processes and the social hypocrisy of fate; but he would have been greater, and none the less a realist, if he had created at least a few characters capable of obtaining spiritual enlightenment in spite of circumstances and at the same time a victorious climax of life. It is well said, however, that no writer can put into his work more of himself than he is conscious of, and Faulstich, whose rage against the stupidity of mankind, resulted finally in that encyclopedia of human stupidity, "Bouvard et Pécuchet," had not so constituted himself as to perceive the reverse of that medal—for instance the capacity for elevation that is ineradicable from the worst of us.

thought as repugnant to them as theirs is to the American reading public? Certainly not while in their present state of mind. But it would be well if they could feel themselves more a part of the world—their own and the world with all their fine equipment of observational and technical talent, into a keener perception of "reality," which, since mankind is assuredly not growing more material while changing, is no longer the perception of Flaubert's day. It would be well if they could feel, with Browning that "The world is not for us. Nor blank, it means intensely and means to be felt." And thereby it would be doing a favor not only to the public but also to themselves. Then, especially if they were Americans, they would be fixing more accurately and vividly for a larger public and perhaps for a remoter posterity the essential significance of the day. They would express the innermost self of the moment, and imbued with that contemporary impulse which gives Dante and Michael Angelo and Milton their indestructible vitality. For as Emerson says of the true artist, "Above his will and out of his sight he is necessitated by the air he breathes and the life on which he and his contemporaries live and toil to share the manner of his time."

no purpose whatever? In his work all lost because it has not a flavor of old bookstall like those on the Strand or commonplace personages in commonplace little towns centuries old who do only the day with David Harum by the book rather interesting way? Is it a smaller achievement to write of great reclamation schemes for great forests in terms of fiction than to note the interpsychological reactions of the martial gentleman who has married a wife too young for him, even if the hero of the Western novel does use something less than classical word construction? And then again we certainly have numbers of the kind. He was a heavy and we write of them in our novels, but they do not infect American life to such an extent that we have to write all our novels about them; we must, if we intend to hold the mirror up to all American life, give a small volume to Mrs. Wiggs and I don't believe Mr. Pickwick will refuse to cordially pass the time of the day with David Harum by the book heaven they must both inhabit. And again after having read Harly's Tess she sits down with Helena Ritchie and I think she will not seem to be an ungrateful heaven they must both inhabit. And again after having read Harly's Tess she sits down with Helena Ritchie and I think she will not seem to be an ungrateful heaven they must both inhabit. And again after having read Harly's Tess she sits down with Helena Ritchie and I think she will not seem to be an ungrateful heaven they must both inhabit.

MARIA THOMPSON DAVIESS

In the last few years it has become the custom among a greater or less number of would-be intellectuals to stand off looking through the eye-critical and complain at the young American novelist. They say sadly, with a great shakeling of heads, that he or she, as the case may be, has not been able to rise to his or her brother and sister writers across the Atlantic. They charge the young toilers at the pen with a serious lack of idealism, lack of a broad comprehension or interpretation of life, in fact lack of everything that the wise ones can think up for the poorer author of fact. "The American author does not paint life as it is," is one of the favorite charges hurled. "Compare him, or her, with the Russian or the English. Now just look at our American—a real American with the blood of those optimistic and invincible pioneers who built their lives on a few acres of prairie, wrote a long novel composed of starvation and love and snow and prison and life without love or hope? 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