

Cannan Urges Us to Write by Our Own Lights

GILBERT CANNAN is not discreet or reverential in his observations on contemporary English novelists. He doesn't offer exactly a prescription, but this interview shows the extent to which the novelist is beating about for new moorings. Possibly he does indicate what is coming. He extends a hand to the new American writing man whoever he is, and advises Americans that they will discover the way of achievement by breaking with Continental traditions and looking out through their own windows. He even advises them to follow their vision bodily through the window—and the devil take care of the sash!

"In England, Mr. Cannan said, "I believe we are going back to the older literary tradition with a new understanding and a reaction in accord with our own epoch. We're going to write novels of life with a faith in life itself—and we'll be concerning ourselves with the destiny of mankind.

"Our novel of to-morrow is going to be under the English influence of Fielding and Richardson. The foreign influence to which the novel will be most subject, in my opinion, will be that of Dostoevsky and Voltaire.

"The growth of Dostoevsky's influence will be an interesting thing to contemplate; for, more than we have realized, Dostoevsky was influenced by Dickens. He might be called a Russianized Dickens. Dickens stated a character, and stated it admirably, but when he undertook anything in the way of analysis he was sadly deficient. Dostoevsky not only states a character as Dickens did; he analyzes it down to the roots and the character becomes an embodiment of that extraordinary Russian mysticism. Under his influence the emphasis on character and analysis in contemporary literature will become more and more ascendant. There will be action, perhaps even a plot, but never a plot unrelated to character development.

II.

"It is astonishing the extent to which Voltaire was scientific. He seems to have been one of the first writers to realize that a man's life and thought are influenced by his digestion. In Voltaire's writings if a man has indigestion and his acts are influenced by it you know it.

"I don't mean to be too didactic in predicting an influence of these older men on our time. I mean that in searching for what is fine and strong we are finding many admirable things in the past that are in accord with our newer point of view. We find we have been looking too narrowly at life. We've been analyzing, but we've been analyzing a lot of little things. The influence of George Gissing has weighed heavily on the Englishman, and under that influence we have analyzed everything in a very small way. We'll get rid of Gissing, and during the development of the new movement even such men as Hardy and Meredith will be almost forgotten.

"While the novelists of to-day are going to be influenced by such men of bigger scope and larger power as those I have mentioned, they are bound to be influenced by the new times we've come upon since the war. Before the war we used life like an inverted opera glass, looking through the big end to see things small. Now we turn to the men who took in all the little things and had the power and scope enough to handle them as though they had meant something as a whole. The war

puts the novelist's character in the centre of action, but always action that reveals character and brings the necessity of broader and deeper analysis.

"It's necessary now to show characters in relation to the big things as well as the small details of daily life. We'll not be interested in seeing a character exhibited from the point of view of his own little personal prejudices. We'll want him in his relation to humanity. What can be done for humanity? What can humanity do for itself? What of the individual in his relation to the affairs of state and the vast affairs of industry? The relations of a man or woman to the activities of the world are to-day very complex indeed.

"What will be the effect of these many contacts? We see and understand them better now. Where is humanity coming out?

III.

"I have given a good deal of thought to the tendency of the contemporary novel in England. I think I see pretty clearly the course it is going to take. I have given a good deal of thought to the destiny of the American novel. Perhaps I see what is going to happen to the American novel, but I see it less clearly, for before anything of great significance can happen to the American novel you've got to stop looking through European windows. That's what you've been trying to do.

"There is a big chance for new men in America, as in England. There's a new generation of writing men every ten years. I would expect that when the American novel does break through it will have a tremendous influence on Europe, even as your industrial methods have. And the day is coming. You're already beginning to look at life by your own lights—out of your own windows.

"American poetry is especially promising—the work of such men as Sandburg and Sherwood Anderson. It's alive, really vigorous, American. I dare say before you have the new American novel that I'm speaking of and looking forward to you'll have novels in verse. However, I cannot look at a versified novel as anything more than a bridge by which the American novelist will cross from present custom, usage and convention in literature to the future where he will be untrammelled by the old ties. Its great service will be in leading the breaking away from old literary traditions.

"It is perfectly true that the consciousness of books and the desire to make a book come from reading books. But a man who stays with books—it's a sad mistake. He's finished. The writer of to-morrow is going to life; more and more he's going to life. He'll put life down as it is in America—and he'll have something to say by way of interpretation of what it means and where it leads.

"In America I see intimations of this thing, rather than the man who is to do it. You see intimations of it everywhere—in the average American's stronger consciousness of America, in the chant of America, bad and good, crude and refined, that is going up from the poets. Dreiser has done something. He may be the present man of biggest achievement. He was necessary. He has been negative and in rebellion. But the new novel will be positive. Hergesheimer, in my opinion, is not the new man. He has picked up some loose threads. He looks at things in a special way, a very fine way too. But it's not the broad, analytical, interpreting view of life that will come.

IV.

"I want to see the new man, who throws aside literary traditions and handles life more fearlessly without regard for a nice little pattern and the old conventions, have his chance. That's why I do not hesitate to criticize the older and established writers of England. There's W. Somerset Maugham. There he stands; he'll continue to be what he is. He's not in the new movement. Doubtless he will continue to do what he has already done. Conrad is not in with the new movement. He loves the sea and he loves to write of it. He'll continue to do so, and he'll always be a tremendous inspiration when it comes to sheer quality and power in using our mother tongue.

"Galsworthy? He went over from novels to plays. He didn't succeed in making himself a vogue among the managers, which was the essential thing, so he failed of a vogue with the public. He went back to novels and found, I think, that his technique and purpose were confused. This, I should say, accounts for the unusual number of essays and dissertations we've had from him. To a large extent

he has the same tendency to 'point of view and argument' that Wells has.

"Wells is now writing his world history. It will be a valuable thing. Years ago in London there was a battle between the 'literate' and the 'illiterate' in the journalistic field. The 'illiterate' won, capturing the English press. If the 'literate' (the group that not only had ideas but knew how to write strong English) had won, Wells and others would have had a chance to get off their yeasty stuff in the newspapers. They would then have written better novels, more dignified, stronger in form and greater in power. Instead of that much that should have gone into journalism has gone into novels.

"Bennett has always written for money. He wrote thirty-odd volumes before he wrote *The Old Wives' Tale*. That novel was done as a sort of reaction against himself. Apparently he was disgusted because his potboilers had not boiled. Now he is alarmed because during the war his income fell from \$15,000 a year to \$5,000. He has gone back to plays. If he goes on writing with money as his aim it will be the end of Bennett.

"Swinnerton is a man of books. He is with books all day, for he is employed in the publishing business. He writes books

at night. His *Nocturne* is a fine thing, hampered considerably, it seems to me, by technique. He is a follower of Gissing, though apparently he has made up his mind to break away from tradition. He is frail in health. It is surprising that a man of his delicate health has been able to break away as far as he has." (Mr. Cannan made no observation here on the degree of health which Dostoevsky had!)

"You ask about my own work. I began with a plan to show, through a sequence of novels, the development of an English family passing through all the industrial phases of the last century. After I had finished one I found that my technique wasn't equal to the task. I stopped to write *Old Mole* and *Mendel*. If I were doing them to-day I should do them quite differently. I suppose my best work is in what they call my gloomy novel, *Around the Corner*, and in *Stucco House*. I am now bringing the English family, whose career I started to trace, down through the war and after."

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