

# A Postscript for Philippa

MY POOR PHILIPPA,

Always remember that you opened these flood-gates, that you even went so far as to invite this second deluge by reporting Miss Greer's comments on my last letter, and by asking me if it wasn't perhaps a coincidence that I had found no book to recommend heartily after ten days of intensive fiction-reading. It isn't very graceful of me to insist on your responsibility, I know, but the messages from your English teacher were not entirely reassuring. They were somewhat too suavely couched, for one thing, and whether it was you or she who did the editing is a point of lively curiosity to me. If it was Miss Greer, you must tell her that she need not hesitate to describe me as "reactionary" and "intolerant", and that the more openly she uses such adjectives the surer I will be that I have made myself clear. To tell you the truth, I have a fondness not entirely based on natural perversity for a good many words that are in disrepute today; in fact I wonder how we are going to get any vigour back into our literature unless we reinstate some of the old words in their original meaning, as well as the contrasts and tensions that they stood for.

You see I am more pleased than not to learn that I have been described as "certainly very conservative", although I wish I might have heard the inflection with which the judgement was pronounced. You were so apologetic about repeating it that it is plain Miss Greer uses "conservative" as an epithet, as do most of our

cultural leaders today. Indeed "conservative", "orthodox", "erudite", "womanly", "mystical"—oh, any number of excellent words—are now confined almost entirely to the vocabulary of opprobrium. One grows used to that, but never to some of the conclusions reached by those who are unaccustomed to define their words. Why, for instance, should it be thought that "reading any modern fiction must be martyrdom to one with such inhumanly high standards"? The full joy of reading only comes after standards have been established (let us pass over "inhumanly" and "high"; we both know well enough what Miss Greer means); for then at last one can enjoy a writer's wit without running the danger of feeling that by agreeing to laugh with him one is under an obligation to accept his version of life, and appreciation of a good prose style is no longer a trap precipitating one into an unhealthy philosophy. No; my pleasure in reading has been not one grain lessened since it dawned on me that verisimilitude and verity are as far apart as paste and pearls. It is true that, now I know what I am looking for, I do not always plod on, in an effort to be scrupulously fair, through a book which begins to bore me with the third sentence. That, I should say, is the one great alteration in my reading habits which "inhumanly high standards" have brought about.

I have been incredulous, amused, exasperated, irritated, depressed, outraged, interested, and delighted by the eight novels I am writing to you about, but those are hardly the moods of martyrdom. Of the eight, two seem to me to have some abiding value, and one of those is completely to my taste. But statistics are not what you want, and here is my report.

I began with G. B. Stern's *Summer's Play*.<sup>\*</sup> It got first chance because its author, although completely unpredictable, wrote *The Matriarch* and one or two other chronicles of Jewish family life which had real virtues. Occasionally she gives us an atrocity: last year's offering, *Long Lost Father*, was bad beyond belief. This is better, but it is not very good, for Miss Stern continues to fob off ingenuity on us in place of true imagination. When ingenuity grips her, there are no lengths to which she will not go in presenting an incredible tale circumstantially. Not all her wiles will make me believe that the bright children of a family who have lived to see their village degenerate into the cheapest kind of summer watering-place could really come to think that the summer visitors (called by the children "The Augs" because most of them make their appearance in August) have no reality except for the period of their vacation—that they "melt away" when their stay is over.

There is a school, or clique, of writers in New York who say, to such protests, "You're being told about some children who *did* believe—" et cetera. This argument is supposed to be unanswerable. It seems to me less argument than bullying, and a reasonable response is surely "I'm not being told well enough". That "willing suspension of disbelief" which every inveterate reader is anxious to make is never possible throughout this book, and Miss Stern must take the responsibility. Still, it is not important. No one could take this for a significant book, and there is a great deal of incidental amusement in it: much fun at the expense of summer-resorters, much good-heartedness

<sup>\*</sup> SUMMER'S PLAY by G. B. Stern (KNOPF. 401 pp. \$2.50)

towards them slapped in so that no feelings will be hurt, a spectacular (and incredible) murder, and not a real idea in the four-hundred-and-one pages.

Novel No. 2: *Set Free*, by Sylvia Paul Jerman.\* You recall that I have admitted that my reading habits have changed in one particular? On page 28 of this book I read that "all along their backs the moonlight lay as thick as nakedness". I sighed, and began to skip. Nor do I think I did the author an injustice. Presumably, having submitted her book for publication, she wished to communicate with readers, but it is an equally fair presumption that she is not looking for readers who are unable to think that nakedness, or any other abstract word, carries an idea of dimension. That automatically bars me from her elect, and, from what I gathered in my hasty survey, the book-jacket sums up the novel more neatly and exactly than I should be able to do: "Candell the banker, who had pride in his job and love for his mistress, Catherine, proud and glamorous and a magnificent mother to his children; Candell's wife, Mary, who kept the use of her heart for Flood Harris even in the villainous dance of his addiction to cocaine; Flood's wife, Amy . . . tormented by lack of money and her passionate love for a man long dead." How nice it would have been, I could not help thinking, if the man long dead could have been Candell the banker. *There* would have been design for you.

You will probably think I am joking, but I took up Vicki Baum's *Falling Star*\*\* with some hope. It is

\* *SET FREE* by Sylvia Paul Jerman (SMITH & HAAS. 251 pp. \$2.00)

\*\* *FALLING STAR* by Vicki Baum (DOUBLEDAY, DORAN. 307 pp. \$2.00)

quite true that this writer lapses into more faults per page than most other popular authors. Nevertheless the *Ewige Weibliche* comes to her rescue again and again, and magnificently. She will be as spectacular, as melodramatic, as improbable as she dares; and then some saving feminine grace will overtake her; it is as though her intuitive knowledge that woman is centrally the conserver, the cherisher, the stabilizer far oftener than she is the siren or deceiver always keeps her this side of the absurd, and in the midst of her violence she returns to humanity.

But this book shows much less of that feminine common sense than its predecessors. Perhaps because its scene is the Troll Kingdom of Hollywood, or perhaps because Frau Baum worked over a well-known cinema "tragedy of real life", she never gets within miles of her story's heart. And in trying to make her characters composite types she loses the last vestige of illusion, presenting us with blurred and fuzzy photographs looking like no one at all. I am sorry, because I had hoped to demonstrate the virtues of melodrama to you with *Falling Star* as my specimen.

That is the last of the inconsiderable books. I wish I had space to tell you fully why I regard a book like *Such Is My Beloved*\* as more insidiously corrupting than many a book that goes without scruple after the emotions and senses. It is the story of a young priest who tries to reclaim two irreclaimable street-walkers. He fails, the girls are shipped out of town, the young priest is reproved by his bishop, and falls into melancholia.

\* *SUCH IS MY BELOVED* by Morley Callaghan (SCRIBNERS. 288 pp. \$2.00)

Now: the average reader will think that Mr. Callaghan has been extraordinarily fair to religion because his hero does not (as is usual in these priest-and-prostitute stories, from *Thaïs* to *Rain*) "fall into sin". Father Dowling is shown as warm-hearted, chivalrous, quixotic to tactlessness, devout, an affectionate son, a loyal friend. Yet he is reprov'd by authority, his actions circumscribed, and actually made to fall sick from disappointment! If religion through its established representatives can oppress a man of such virtues, what, dozens of voices will be asking in every city in the land, can religion have to offer us?

But, please, "let us discriminate". Do not fall easily, led by your own warm-heartedness, into the error of Mr. Callaghan and his admirers. Father Dowling was being reprehended, not for devoutness, not for loyalty, not for love of sinners, but for lack of prudence. "Oh, prudence!" you will say in disgust, since this is just such a word as those I spoke of earlier, a good word which has fallen on evil days, and which is now taken to mean a petty, niggling, self-regarding caution. Imagine anyone's praying for the virtue, or "habit", of prudence! Yet your contempt is based on a misapprehension, and prudence is none the less a virtue for being wrongly defined by an uninstructed generation.

By the time I had come to the end of the novel I found myself respecting the bishop more than I loved Father Dowling, and the "big scene" between the two men solidified my respect. For the young priest was not only imprudent, he was a confused thinker. Do you see what is wrong with this passage, and if not will you show it to Miss Greer and ask her to point

it out to you? The bishop says, in the course of his interview with the priest, "I should imagine the notion of prostitution alone would make you sick with disgust". To which Father Dowling replies: "If I start hating prostitutes where am I going to stop?" On considering the matter perhaps it will be safer to be explicit here even at the risk of sounding condescending, for there is every evidence that Mr. Callaghan thinks that Father Dowling made a point, and his publishers surely do: they quote from this scene to give prospective purchasers the essence of the book. And from what you tell me of your teacher I should not be surprised to hear that she, too, considered this retort a fair one. That's as may be; the thing to notice is that Father Dowling's reply does not touch the bishop's comment at any point: the priest was not for one moment being exhorted to hate prostitutes. If I had been his bishop I should have sent Father Dowling back to the Seminary and kept him there till he mastered his Logic.

Nevertheless Mr. Callaghan is a good writer, and his simple, clear, direct pages are a joy. I am one of those Pharisees who can get a great deal too much information about the home-life of street-walkers in less than two pages, but for the pleasure of reading untortured English prose I read most of *Such Is My Beloved*.

Coming to *Frost in May*\* I come to a serious problem. How can I, even in a very long letter, make you sympathize with my stand when I say that here is a book in lovely English, full of humour and delicate observation—and that I wish it had never been

\* FROST IN MAY by *Antonia White* (VIKING. 267 pp. \$2.50)

written? This is the story of a little girl whose father, in the first zeal of his conversion to Catholicism, sends her to a convent-school where the rule is very strict, the sisters unwearying in their vigilance. The child, born outside the tradition in which she is being educated, never feels fully at ease; and toward the end of her stay she is discovered to have written a few chapters of a sensational novel (in which all the characters were later to be converted), and is sent away for that indiscretion. *Blighted*, the title obviously indicates.

It is my custom (let me recommend it to you) to begin each book without looking at the excerpts from press-notices which may be on the cover. When I looked to see what English reviewers had thought I was startled, truly, to see that I had drawn all the wrong conclusions. I had thought, "Since adolescence is always a time of such intensities, of molehill-mountains and teapot-tempests, how fortunate that some children can have their crises turn on matters of real importance". To the end I went on feeling so, remembering young agonies about silk dresses and hair-ribbons hardly less dreadful than these fictional agonies, but with no aftermath of positive value. The tragic title could not overpower me, since I knew I sat reading the story of Antonia White (although she was transparently calling her heroine Fernanda Grey) who was an excellent writer, plainly the better for the discipline she had undergone in a school which must have been very like the Convent of the Five Wounds.

Knowing this, it was impossible to think of *Frost in May* as a representation of the full truth. It is written with a nice objectiveness, but the detachment is, one fears, an imitation of detachment. Unfortunately the



imitation is so good, the book so skillfully done, that many readers will overlook the evidence right there in their hands that Fernanda Grey was not ruined by her early experience. They will grow indignant over sensitive children wrecked by harsh discipline, and some of them will agitate to overthrow all discipline in education. What is graver still, the novel will give weapons to every non-Christian in the endless war that is waged against Christianity. The end result of such a book as this, and of *Such Is My Beloved*, is to undermine respect for Christianity, and so ultimately for all religion.

*German Family*,\* with its innocent airs, is an outrage. Here is as bald an example of false simplification as you will find in a year. Real simplification, removing the extraneous, casual, and irrelevant material from a story (except for the amount needed to give the illusion of reality), is always the task of the artist. But suppressing relevant and necessary material in order to gain an unwarranted effect is the propagandist's trick.

An English mother and daughter marry German Jews at the close of the War. There is not one word about the difficulties which always attend an interracial marriage, no hint that the Jewish families involved were anything but overjoyed at the alliances with Christians. There is a great deal of emphasis on the fact that these Jews, while proud of their race, are no longer bigots in their religion, and the young English mother has her Jewish husband's child baptized—oh, just *because*, you know—all those trivial

\* GERMAN FAMILY by L. C. N. Stone (BOBBS-MERRILL. 345 pp. \$2.50)

vestiges of ritual are of no importance between real human beings! On the contrary, you are given to understand that if anti-Semitism had not sprung full-blown from the head of Hitler not one cloud would have appeared on the horizons of these lavishly intermingled marriages.

As the book goes on you realize with some consternation that in spite of all this understanding and goodwill between the races every villain in the book (and it bristles with villains) is a Christian and every Jew is without exception good, loyal, gentle, patient, and loving. Towards the end this plea for the continuance of brotherly love becomes uproariously funny, and as hitherto friendly Christians desert life-long companions, seduce pure Jewish girls, kick Jewish dogs, carry away Jewish children, and are met almost invariably with forbearance and tenderness, rail human nature rebels and shouts with laughter. But *German Family* is no laughing matter, and I hope that every Jew with pride in his race and his religion will treat this sick and sycophantic book as the reachery it is.

To turn from this to *The Unforgotten Prisoner*\* is to give Mr. Hutchinson's book about strain and loyalty between two cultures—this time genuinely German and English—an advantage which it does not need. For while this book is by no means so good as is first, *The Answering Glory*, being far too long, too diffuse in the middle, and too confusing in its leaps between first-person recounting and third-person narration, it is, as I suspect this author's books will

\*THE UNFORGOTTEN PRISONER by R. C. Hutchinson  
FARRAR & RINEHART. 564 pp. \$2.75)

Philura Gould Baldwin

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always be, about fully human characters. There is one whopping coincidence in it, but it did not bother me at all: the narrator of the book, who was responsible for breaking up a marriage between his brother and a German girl when she is already with child, is later the commander of a company which must shoot his nephew's step-father as a spy.

But "responsible", in Mr. Hutchinson's vocabulary, means what it should mean. Becoming aware of the injustice he has perpetrated, the hero hunts long and arduously for his nephew, gets him at last into his own home—after the child has nearly lost his mind from terror, cruelty, and starvation in post-War Germany—does all he can to retrieve his error, and at last lets the boy make his own choice of lives; and Klaus chooses to go back to Germany. The effect of the book is tonic and bracing, in spite of Mr. Hutchinson's too conscientious retailing of horrors in the central section.

Now at last I come to the book which I liked completely. It is *The Flowering Thorn*.<sup>\*</sup> Miss Sharp's first novel, *Fanfare for Tin Trumpets*, was hardly better than very clever; but it was fresh and witty, and I foresaw two hours' pleasure at least from any book of hers. I could hardly have been prepared for a novel in which approval and laughter should attend every paragraph. I also have the rare joy of feeling almost complacently triumphant: Miss Sharp proves for me that a novel can be contemporary, light, possibly ephemeral, and still sound to the core.

She takes a young Londoner, a girl, at a moment of dissatisfaction with her casual life and comrades

<sup>\*</sup> THE FLOWERING THORN by Margery Sharp (PUTNAM 311 pp. \$2.50)

The dissatisfaction is soundly motivated. Lesley sees a man whom she could love, and because he is busy, happy, and ambitious, the artificial smartness of her group means nothing to him. The next day, rebellious, unhappy, contemptuous of herself, she volunteers—simply to keep on shocking the bourgeois—to adopt a “problem-child” who has been left on her aunt’s hands by the death of a servant.

Her shocker has far-flung consequences. She cannot support the child and herself in London on her income, so she is forced to go to the country. She does not dissolve in sentimental adoration of the inconvenient baby, but she grows to respect and like him. She has a little old servant, some animals, a garden, and, little by little, relations here and there with the people of the countryside. About half-way through the novel, Lesley’s situation—Lesley, who had lived in stark loneliness in a smart apartment building “with a waiting-list as long as Deuteronomy”—is summed up like this:

All through the summer Lesley’s household consolidated itself. It now included, besides Patrick, Mrs. Sprigg, and Pincher, a fine ginger cat who was sometimes called Alice; and of this tiny universe—as variously inhabited, for all its size, as the island in *The Tempest*—Lesley herself was the natural and undisputed centre. Within it, whatever she said or did was of extreme importance: goddess-like in her meanest activities, she dispensed food, favour, justice, and protection. She had scraps for a dog, milk for a cat, bread for a child, a wage for an old woman: she had a roof and a fire and a door to shut or open. She was beginning to be beloved, and she was already essential.

Do you suppose a woman exists who would not find that situation enviable? The one element lacking in that summary of a good life is promised in the last pages. I hope you will like *The Flowering Thorn*. When I say that possibly it is ephemeral I mean no disparagement. I think, I even hope, that the strained bright artificiality of our period will pass like a dream, and that in a few years the records of the way we acted in these twenty years after the close of the War will seem so improbable, so fantastic, so senseless, that they will be impossible to read. Maybe not; the Restoration was also a fantastic period in England, and we still read, amused but incredulous, of the ways of Millamant. But a Congreve was closer than a Coward in time, if not in spirit, to a period of true culture; so perhaps most of the books about and by the Bright Young People will have to die. May they rest in peace! But I think I will keep *The Flowering Thorn* on my shelves to show my grandchildren how good a light novel of my age could be.

Your devoted godmother,

DOROTHEA BRANDE

# American Art and Western Culture

E. P. RICHARDSON

THE study of the arts of sculpture, architecture, and painting in the United States can hardly be said to have begun: the ground is still encumbered by problems which belong to the approach to criticism rather than to the examination of quality, and chief among them is the problem of the Americanism of art. For a hundred and fifty years American democracy has been asking for a native American art. It is still asking. There has been art in America, indeed, for three hundred years; but the demand is, not that there should be art in America, but that we have an art wholly our own, clearly different from European arts.

The Museum of Modern Art, for instance, recently held a survey-exhibit of the painting of sixteen American cities, in a praiseworthy attempt to show that the arts of the country were not wholly confined to New York. The review appearing in the *New York Times* was written in a tone of disappointment at the lack of a native development. As a horrible example it pointed to an artist, born on a ranch in Montana, who produced a pastiche of the Italo-Parisian painter Chitico. A Pittsburgh artist who painted steel mills was held to have introduced a native note. In point of quality, both paintings were equally meaningless. This was overlooked in the search for a native touch.

A worse form of the same attitude is the down-with-the-dirty-foreigner attitude which is becoming more