

THE NATIONAL MUSIC FALLACY

BY CHARLES L. BUCHANAN

THAT will-o-the-wisp of æsthetic wisdom, Mr. James McNeill Whistler, asserted with his habitual and exhilarating decisiveness that there was no such thing as nationalism in art, that one might as well speak of national mathematics as of national picture making. It was the sort of iconoclasm one might have expected from the gentleman who refused "to have been born in Lowell." That Mr. George Moore (than whom there is no keener artistic intelligence in the English speaking world to-day despite his somewhat peevish hostility to Mr. W. B. Yeats) should have taken exception to the point of view, utilising it as evidence of a critical instability on the part of the extraordinary and eccentric painter, is one of the outstanding curiosities of the records of criticism.

When modesty is confronted with the somewhat abrupt fact that either it or the rest of the world is obsessed by illusion, its inclination is to assume that it is in error, and to reorganise its point of view in accordance with the opinions of the majority. Mr. Whistler, luckily unburdened with that uncomfortable encumbrance, modesty, saw nothing more nor less in the opinions of the majority than a very dreadful something to be contradicted and insulted when it could not be avoided and ignored. One cannot help seeing a considerable justice in the Whistler attitude. It must be confessed that the world thinks mostly in ruts, and that an accurate feeling for values is more rare even than Lowell's day in June. We are overwhelmed by a flood of facile appraisals and a deal of loose talk that a moment's intelligent, honest thinking would vehemently repudiate. "Light and air," for example, is pinned to the painting of Claude Monet just as though no one else in the whole wide world had ever achieved an

effect of "light and air." As a matter of fact, one could, no doubt, name a score of painters whose canvases excel Monet's in the rendering of nature's myriad intricacies and subtleties of atmospheric phenomena. What we should emphasise in Monet is a colour sense meretricious, perhaps, but audacious, and an experimental policy premeditated, no doubt, but valuable. As for "light and air," we shall find it in Corot, Cazin and an army of American landscape painters to an extent unequalled in the best of French Impressionism. Again, take the peculiar case of Brahms. "Brahms is an inexorable form maker," says the redoubtable Mr. Huneker, and Brahms is this, that and a dozen other things (all of which he indubitably is not) say his admirers, thereby doing incalculable harm to their idol. Well, I remember once analysing—I should say attempting to analyse—the Brahms Violin Concerto with the distinguished violinist, Kathleen Parlow. As much in accord as we were over the inherent beauty of the music (music of an inexpressible and lofty loveliness), we could neither of us determine the proportions of a work that she knew by heart, and had played innumerable times. Heterodoxy if you will, but a thing demonstrable in so far as anything in so intangible a matter as art can be demonstrated. Brahms a form maker! If form be that manner of expression best calculated to project with justice and accuracy the conception of the artist to another then we are not far wrong in applying the word inarticulate to the efforts of Brahms.

So however much Whistler's assertion that there was no such thing as nationality in art may have appeared iconoclastic, it was, in reality, only a negative iconoclasm, a statement that

seemed acutely and appallingly revolutionary for the sole and simple reason that it was sheerly and tritely true. As a matter of fact, this question of nationalism in æsthetics is one of the most remarkable exhibitions on record of that slovenly habit inherent in human nature of allowing itself to slip into easy formulas of thinking (or, rather, of allowing others to think for it) once these formulas are macadamised by custom and marked a state road on the intellectual map. Perhaps no idea in the history of art has clung so tenaciously to the common comprehension as this idea of nationalism, of sectionalism and of idiom. Not a month goes by but that some one or other of our periodicals proclaims this astounding fallacy. When a journalist falls short of a topic he sets himself to the facile task of upbraiding American art or American music for its lack of a national character. "So far," says one of these gentlemen, "America has produced no really distinctive painting." In other words, George Inness, whose pictures are literally saturated with the soul of our American countryside, and Winslow Homer, whose pictures are as pungently individual as the odour of a country grocery store are lacking in national character! One-half moment's thought will show us the absurdity of this contention. But let us assume that the charge is true; let us allow these professional malcontents to prove the invalidity of their own case. After having disposed of our painting with the royal irresponsibility of utter ignorance they proceed to eulogise the work of Sargent, Whistler, and Miss Mary Cassatt, three artists who have lived and worked practically their entire æsthetic lives under the influence of and in touch with influences utterly alien to anything remotely resembling a native spirit. Surely discrepancy of judgment can go no further than this. Another gentleman contributes the following: "You cannot tell an American composer's art-song from a mediocre art-song the world over." And again: "The important point is that ragtime is original with

Americans—it is their own creation, it is the one genuine American music." Well, setting aside a rather too obvious and partially impertinent retort to the effect that merely because ragtime is our own creation we have no more reason for being proud of it than we may have for priding ourselves upon iced-water, child-labour, or food adulteration, we ask ourselves if there is any indispensable significance in these points of view. In other words, is it true that our art is a hybrid, sterile art merely because it fails (if it does fail) to register a salient impression of our national characteristics? And is it true that art to be a valid, vital art must express nationality?

Besides the little fellows who will reply affirmatively, every generation possesses its High Priest of parochialism. In our immediate time Mr. Yeats, the Irish poet, has extolled and exploited the merits of an art which seeks its inspiration from the soil. Surely a superficial attitude quite calculated to appeal to an exquisite but superficial poet like Mr. Yeats. Having told us how Verlaine once cried to him in Paris "strangle rhetoric!" he proceeded to censure us, gently and I am bound to say with charming persuasiveness, for our allegiance to the Tennysonian tradition. I remember the fine scorn with which he articulated the phrase: "moral uplift." And then we listened to such an inconsequential trifle as "The Fiddler of Dooney."

The mistake committed by Mr. Yeats and the gentleman who urges ragtime upon us if we would save our musical souls is the mistake of failing to distinguish between two distinctly different kinds of art and two distinctly different kinds of reaction to art. The infallible sign of the authentic artistic attitude is that it shall be able to estimate accurately and to enjoy in equitable proportion things widely diversified and emphatically antithetical. It has a lounging room in its intelligence where it dismisses Meredith or Pater, and abandons itself with a dissolute expenditure of

sympathy to the immortal tale of Sydney Carton or chuckles over the impeccable sagacity of Chicot the Jester. Many of its most audacious moments of youthful irresponsibility are inextricably woven into memories of "Hello ma Baby" or "Under the Bamboo Tree," and to this day it will abandon Debussy for the inimitable verve of Mr. Victor Herbert, or the crude, brazen vernacular of Mr. Irving Berlin. But it does not call Chicot the Jester or Sydney Carton or "Hello ma Baby" great art. It does not call American ragtime or a Russian folksong great art. It does not rank Synge's *Playboy* as great a play as *Hamlet* or *Lear*, and it does not rank anything that Mr. Yeats ever wrote co-equal in dignity, profundity of emotion and strength of structure with the great poetic art of England at its representative best.

For if we are able to determine any one thing in so indeterminable a matter as art, it is that all the art of the world that has come down to us with the accumulated approvals of generations upon it is art that is abstract in its substance and universal in its significance. A man who makes idiom his intellectual language has necessarily impaired the scope of his intelligence and his appeal. He is working in a medium essentially transient, or, if not transient, at least limited in the range of its emotional dynamics. Force Beauty into wedlock with Idiom, and you mate a Princess to a reporter. The great poems of the world — on what have they been founded? On the love of any man for any woman, on a west wind, a skylark, a nightingale? The great pictures of the world? Surely the ones that we treasure most are idealisations, impressions, things that swim in a dream world between fact and fancy. Music? The great music of the world is not found in exploitations of Russian or Norwegian or Irish folk melodies. As a matter of concrete, ascertainable fact it is not one whit too much to claim that there is not a single trace of nationalism to be discovered in that kind of music that is

ranked by consensus of opinion the loftiest kind of music. This is not a question of personal idiosyncrasy and infirmity of judgment; it is an objective, demonstrable proposition. That hordes of well-meaning and oftentimes eminent writers on this subject should in the face of this urge, year in, year out, the indispensable necessity of our expressing nationality in our music if our music is to be other than a negligible thing is a phenomena psychical in its significance. For the astoundingly obvious fact confronts us—that is to say it confronts us if we give the matter a moment's serious consideration—that nationalism is not only a dispensable component in the art of music—it is practically a non-existent component. Why then censure American music for lacking what no other music in the world possesses?

To those persons whose eyebrows rise and whose shoulders shrug over this statement I again emphasise the following distinction: There is, undoubtedly, a kind of music that partakes or appears to partake of the characteristics of a nation. It is often music of an inexpressible loveliness, tenderness and pathos. Turn, for example, to Percy Grainger's "Irish Tune from County Derry," and note the cleverly calculated effect of the consecutive fifths in the treble, or the hauntingly beautiful D flat in place of the D natural in the harmony at the close. Here is Ireland for you!—a few miraculous sentences out of George Moore's *Hail and Farewell* or that lyric in prose *The Lake*. Turn to the Grieg Concerto with its never to be forgotten second theme full of "the sighing sound, the lights around the shore." Turn to that incomparable bit of musical effervescence "The Bartered Bride" overture, a bit of sound as breezy and blithe as a mid-May day. Turn, above all, to those moments in Tchaikovsky where he utilises with what some of us think is an unrivalled ingenuity the folk music of Russia. One may prefer these things. I, for example, sometimes think that certain moments in Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony—a symphony impreg-

nated with the moving spirit of nationalism—come closer to me than any other music in all Tchaikovsky. For a certain wistful, remote beauty—beauty literally moist with the heart-ache of the far-away—there are a few bars in the last movement which are a part of my very heart strings.

But here is the point: Aside from one's individual preferences, we are forced to acknowledge that this is not the kind of music that the world calls great music. Tchaikovsky at his greatest?—the "Romeo and Juliet," the "Francesca da Rimini," the "Pathetic" Symphony—music utterly lacking the faintest trace of national colour, music utterly ignoring national material. When Tchaikovsky frankly bases himself upon a national material, as he does in his C Minor Symphony, he is ignored, and the composition eventually falls into oblivion. Chopin at his greatest?—never the mazurkas, the polonaises where, indeed, certain national characteristics, however sophisticated, are in evidence, but, instead, the scherzos, the preludes, the etudes, the ballades—all of them music, sheerly abstract, music immaculately emancipated from a material world, music the origin of which is not a given locality, a special soil but the universal ether-world of the spirit. Wagner at his greatest?—by common consent *Tristan*, a work absolutely cosmopolitan in technical resource, in melodic colouring, in emotional appeal. Whether it be the opening bars of *Tristan*, or Beethoven's Fifth or Seventh Symphony or ninety per cent. of Chopin's incomparable music or what you will—we are confronted by a quality and kind of sound that comes out of a spiritual void and returns to it leaving in its wake no significance save that which is inherent in a sheer, intangible and disembodied loveliness.

Here are indisputable statements. An explanation of them may more properly belong to the province of psychology than to the province of æsthetics. It appears obvious, however, that the question rests on the relative valuableness of

what one might call representative art versus abstract art. The records of art, if they demonstrate anything, demonstrate the tenuous and transient quality of an art that concerns itself with local or contemporary characteristics. Contrary to the popular opinion, the validity of an art appears to be in inverse proportion to its topical and topographical significance. When the advocate of ragtime from whom we have previously quoted suggests that "the future American symphony and opera will be written in ragtime," we realise the depths of absurdity to which a fundamental fallaciousness in one's point of view can lead one. And this fundamental fallaciousness resides in the indubitable and incontestable fact that art is not the expression of an aggregate, it is the expression of an individual. It is in no way, shape or form concerned with anything but itself. It is under no obligation to express nationality, and, indeed, it is only incidentally concerned with nationality. Art is a sublimated egoism, an adroit and exquisite exploitation of individual experience and of individual emotion. In its most felicitous and remarkable instances this vehemence of personal expression is miraculously combined with a decorative quality so sheerly beautiful that we would accept it if for nothing else than for its external beauty. Whether it be a picture of Renoir's, or a poem of Keats's; an etude of Chopin's, or Wagner's *Tristan*, the tendency is unmistakably in the direction of the abstract as opposed to the concrete precisions of representation. It is a short-sighted and bigoted æstheticism that would ignore the wistful, virile, fresh, pungent charm of folk-music and vernacular, but only a mediocre or an unthinking mind can place the manipulator of an existing idiom on the same plane with the originator or transmitter of a beauty that had not been previously in the world. By the simple expedient of utilising with discretion the million and more melodies tossed out year after year by our profligate pied-pipers of the Great White Way, a composer could

achieve a not illegitimate effect of racy individualism. But this is a very different matter from the God-given uniqueness of utterance, structural beauty and emotional significance that means Genius. The great moments in music are a divine articulating of a new and intangible beauty, a beauty strangely come like a hint dropped us from eternity. They are not the stutterings of dialect. They are as far above the nasal twang of ragtime as the prose of Pater is above the vernacular of Mr. George M. Cohan. The reason we have not produced a great music maker in this country is not because we have no characteristic musical small-talk (we have oceans of it, and most of it is admirable for what it is), but solely and simply because we have had, with one exception, MacDowell, no individual temperament of a sufficient fineness, originality, intensity and inspirational vigour to create this music for us. If this music-maker comes, he will, in all human probabilities, not attempt to express the Grand Canyon or the Woolworth Building or the Steel Corporation in music. He will, no doubt, concern himself as Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Tchaikovsky and Wagner concerned themselves with mankind's enduring heritage of heartache and ecstasy, victory and defeat.

A people does not express itself in art, nor does it create art; its art is created for it by an individual who sometimes (witness our own MacDowell, Blake-lock, and others) is driven into insanity over the opposition and indifference accorded him. Let it be respectfully submitted to the chronic champions of the

people in art that the people's activities in art are usually confined to an inveterate antagonism to it. The German people did not compose *Tristan and Isolde*; *Tristan and Isolde* was composed by one Richard Wagner, intellectual and emotional autocrat if ever there was one. Not only in the external quality of its appeal, but, as well, in its fundamental substance a music and the point of view back of that music is not the peculiar and inalienable possession of a country or a people. Wagner's most comprehensive and compelling effort is based upon the sheerly simple theme of a man and woman in love. The only successful setting to music of Shakespeare was accomplished by an Italian, Verdi. Byron's *Manfred* and the exotic legend of *Francesca da Rimini* served the Russian Tchaikovsky as an inspiration for what may be his greatest music. We no sooner seem to have uncovered a point of view characteristically Russian in the most tragic music ever written, Tchaikovsky's "Pathetic" Symphony, than we find in that extraordinary conception of the Scotch-English James Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night," an analogous mood of infinite, poignant and terrible calamity. Obviously, the quality of individual conception, of individual imagination, is of a higher, keener, more precious kind than that of collective conception, collective imagination. That art, at its greatest, should serve to express and to typify the cumulative wants, passions and ideals of all human experience is an occult and fortuitous circumstance, seldom, if ever, a premeditated achievement.

SILVER GREY LAURELS: AN APPRECIATION OF W. H. HUDSON*

BY FLORENCE FINCH KELLY

FAME is sometimes as blind as Cupid and as reckless in his choice of those upon whom to bestow his favours. Else, the books of W. H. Hudson* would now be delighting the very souls of thousands of readers who have never even heard of him. All who do know his work will be glad that fame seems to be preparing to make what amends are possible at this late day for the early mistake and to lay upon his whitening head the laurels that should have been placed there long ago. For both in England and America those who love good literature are learning what a treasure lies ready for them in his books. The laurels come late to him, but, one wonders, will he enjoy them any the less because he has reached the elder years and has already achieved what will be, perhaps, well nigh the full tale of his labours? So much are we accustomed to associating pleasure in the bays with

youth or the vigorous years of manhood that one has to consider just what long-delayed but well-deserved fame may mean to a man who has lived long and done his work with but the scantiest meed of praise.

I am persuaded that to such a man late-coming fame must give far more of satisfaction and enjoyment than he could have gained from recognition earlier in life. For his wider knowledge of his fellow-men and deeper sympathy with them will endue their acclaim and regard with a richness and a weight of human meaning of which he would have known nothing in his younger life. Philosophy, too, the philosophy that comes only with years and knowledge of humanity, will help him to know just what is worth while in that acclaim so that he can easily cast aside its dross and enjoy in it that which is pure and fine. On the whole, it seems to me that one of the best and most worth having of the pleasures of life is his who has had to wait until the evening of his days for the appreciation of his fellows—if, finally, it comes to him in due, full measure. And just such silver grey laurels, it appears, in both England and America, are about to be the meed of W. H. Hudson.

But little is known, at least on this side of the Atlantic, about Mr. Hudson's life and personality. He has been writing delightful books for many years, but so little heed has been paid to them that no one has cared to inquire about their author. In addition, he is said to be a shy man and to dislike giving out information about himself. So, about all that can be said of him personally is the little it is possible to gather in a remark dropped here and there in his

*Green Mansions: A Romance of the Tropical Forrest. By W. H. Hudson. Introduction by John Galsworthy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

The Purple Land: Being the Narrative of Richard Lamb's Adventures in South America, as Told by Himself. By W. H. Hudson. Introduction by Theodore Roosevelt. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

Tales of the Pampas. By W. H. Hudson. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Idle Days in Patagonia. By W. H. Hudson. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

A Crystal Age. By W. H. Hudson. Introduction by Clifford Smyth. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

Adventures Among Birds. By W. H. Hudson. New York: Mitchell Kennerley.

A Shepherd's Life: Impressions of the South Wiltshire Downs. By W. H. Hudson. Illustrated by Bernard C. Gotch. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

Birds and Man. By W. H. Hudson. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.