

## THE LONDONER

*Skits on Mrs. Humphry Ward, and Others—Portraiture and Parody in Novels—Imitation: a Jacobean Ghost—Cicely Hamilton—Bertrand Russell in China—More Travelers—The Hawthornden Prize Again—A Life of Dostoyevsky—Squeamishness in Relatives, and the Difficulties of the Biographer.*

LONDON, August 1, 1920.

The other month I wrote about Mrs. Humphry Ward and Miss Rhoda Broughton, and gave examples of the way in which the latter used the lives of her contemporaries as matter for fiction, and of the several lampoons composed upon the manner of the former by later novelists and playwrights. This paragraph has produced a most interesting letter from a correspondent. The writer alludes to Arnold Bennett's skit in "The Honey-moon", which, he says, "one can never forget". He proceeds: "But do you remember Hichens's picture in an early volume of short stories called 'The Black Spaniel'? I found it in a seaside library, and there at any rate it seemed full of chuckles. Then there is Mallock's 'The Individualist', with the preface expressing the author's pained surprise at being even suspected of doing a portrait of Mrs. Ward. But I'm inclined to think that the most curious of all is in a novel by a less famous writer, Mrs. George de Horne Vaisey if I can trust my memory. She gives you a sham Mrs. Ward. A girl from the country greedy for celebrities is solemnly presented by a mischievous friend to a stately dame at a garden party. The little scene is

quite well done, and the supposed Mrs. Ward plays up all right. I wonder whether the next generation of novelists are being 'skitted' like that by irreverent contemporaries."

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The possibilities opened by this letter are enormous. When I grasped them, I shuddered at the chance that we were surrounded by "chiels" taking notes. Imagine! Wells has often enough presented himself in the guise of "little Wilkins, the novelist"—see, in particular, "The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman". He has also been merciless, as, in earlier times, were Disraeli and Trollope, in his caricatures of persons of importance in their day, and persons of less importance. He has even brought to bear his satirical pen upon men of a generation younger than his own. But I know of only one portrait of Wells in a work by another writer, and this was a kindly picture, and no satire. Bennett was once pictured in a musical comedy, under the name of "Mr. Benn". Gilbert Cannan has set various people by the ears by telling about them or their forebears in works of fiction, in such a way that the originals are plain for all to see. Mackenzie has mischievously portrayed ridiculous people with a toe in

the literary world. But nobody, to my knowledge, has gone to the novelists for material in the way that older persons have gone to Mrs. Ward. The reason is perhaps that the young ones are all writing about themselves, and cannot see the wood for the trees. Cannan, more than any other, has used real people as models; and Cannan himself has been depicted in unflattering terms. But on the whole portraits are used more for serious than satirical purposes, and this of course makes them less amusing to the ordinary reader, although the originals become for some reason personally more ferocious toward the artist at whose hands they have suffered.

I do not know anything about the ethics of the business, but I do not think there are many serious portraits which are successful in giving the reality of real persons. On the whole the man who is made into a character loses his vitality in the process. If he appears once or twice, all is well, and his superficial traits may be preserved. If, however, an attempt is made to give him more than external treatment, the result is most often something which is neither like nor vivid. My own belief is that when the novelist goes to an actual original the created character is nothing at all. How could he be anything? The essence of creation is original impulse, and observed traits are a hindrance rather than a help. They get in the way. They lead to cramp and caricature (involuntary). Real caricature is another matter, and it is in real caricature that we seem to be weak at present.

I will reveal the reason. Mrs. Ward was the last of the "serious" serious novelists. Her successors, although truly serious in relation to the things that matter, are not so seriously seri-

ous. They are not serious when it comes to contemplation of themselves. They may be conceited, but self-laughter is one of the habits of our age. One cannot imagine Mrs. Ward caricaturing herself. She was too "serious". But Wells has often enough made fun, sometimes wistful fun, of himself; and Bennett has been enjoying himself ever since he began to write. He is the hero of all his lighter books, although he may have drawn all the heroes different, as Fielding drew the two landladies. It is Bennett's spirit that informs Denry and the others. He is a humorist who enjoys the spectacle of himself cheering up the world. Most of the younger novelists of any account can make fun of themselves. It is one of their good traits. When one can ridicule oneself there is no need for anybody else to take up the task. One reason why Mrs. Ward gave her irreverent juniors so much wicked delight is that she always acted in the most perfect good faith, and without any humor whatsoever. She thus, in the vulgar phrase, "asked for it".

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This seriousness is what opens the way alike to caricature and to parody. How many of our modern writers lend themselves to parody? Very few. Take the masterly "Christmas Garland" of Max Beerbohm, for example. It is quite true that the skit on Bennett is a huge lark; but if one thinks about it one realizes that it is less a parody than a delightful imitation. Bennett might himself have written it. The parodies of Wells and Conrad do not seem to me to come off at all. They do not make us laugh. Henry James, on the other hand, as he belongs to an earlier generation, is easy to make fun of in a perfectly gentle way such as Max always employs. His

phrases, his circumambulatory method of expression, are both of the true stuff for parody. The same applies to Meredith and to George Moore, the skits upon whom are things to be relished with pure delight. I cannot imagine parodies as exquisite of our young intellectuals. They are all said to write alike, and once their preoccupation with adolescence is exploited there remains but the ghost of a gesture. Solemn gesture is the thing for the parodist to seize. Without it, no amount of facetiousness will avail.

Imitation is another matter. Probably no writer has so lent himself to imitation as Henry James. He eats into the style of so many of our modern writers that his influence is about the most obvious thing to be noticed in the work of many writers who deal with adventures of the mind and spirit instead of adventures of the body. Edith Wharton is much more than an imitation: she has practically recreated the James method. Something the same might be said of another American woman novelist, Anne Douglas Sedgwick, who has just experimented with a spirit yarn in "The Third Window", and is to follow this with an ingenious series of "flower" stories in the same manner, under the title of "Autumn Crocuses". What is still more remarkable is the sudden emergence of Jacobean style in "Lucas Malet's" new novel, "The Tall Villa", which has stirred London by its real ability and the astonishing effort of its publishers in calling it "Lucas Malet's new creepy story". In this, the ghost talks unmistakable James. He goes the length of remarking, "I very uniquely love you." No ghost not nurtured on Henry James could possibly talk like that. He says elsewhere: "I do not return here because I inevitably and rather horribly must." You can

see that he is a very superior ghost indeed. I inevitably and rather horribly must say as much. To such lengths will a steady reading of James bring any ghost (or novelist). I do not pretend to say whether the ghosts or the novelists are wrong. I merely record the fact.

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By the way, I have learned that an English novel of distinction is being published in America with some éclat, under the title "William—an Englishman". This book attracted a good deal of attention here on its publication. It is the work of Cicely Hamilton, and Cicely Hamilton is far too remarkable a woman to be passed over in this causerie. She has had a very various career, and I am glad to learn that the book received a twenty-thousand-franc prize, even though the francs, converted into English or American money, must have shrunk to a smaller sum than one would at first suppose. (How splendid, by the way, francs always sound in computation of large sums of money; and what an asset they always were to Balzac in his dazzling array of figures!) I first heard of Cicely Hamilton in connection with the suffrage agitation. But she then had a real theatrical success with a play on the "living-in" system which used to be, and may still be, a disgrace to our English drapery stores. The play was called "Diana of Dobson's" and it had a run and a literary success as well. There followed novels of less importance; and then the author made a genuine hit in the part of the lugubrious lady in "Fanny's First Play" who says that happiness must come from within. It was a fine study, sincere and restrained. A war book came next, not a novel, and I remember seeing it enthusiastically reviewed in "The Ob-

server" by, I think, George Moore. "William—an Englishman" was published within the last year or so, and is on a different plane from anything hitherto attempted by Miss Hamilton. It is a steady-sighted and a pitiless book.

Miss Hamilton had a good deal of war experience. It led her to fresh conclusions. She was the observer of a whole group of women in the war zone, and her own experiences were thrilling. She had a very singular opportunity of comparing the behavior of the two sexes in times of great stress. Whether her views were at all modified I cannot say (I mean in relation to the suffrage), but she certainly was a witness to some of the levity with which women behaved in the course of the great trial. One thing she definitely observed, and that was the greater insensibility to danger of women. During air raids, for example, when death was very near, it was the men who were most affected, most exhausted by the strain. With them courage was far more a matter of will. I record this, not because it has a literary interest, but because I think it is a testimony to the impartiality of Miss Hamilton, whose freedom from prejudice seems to be a noble and invigorating thing.

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Warfare and revolutions stain the world. But the spirit of curiosity is insatiable. I hear that our foremost philosopher, Bertrand Russell, not content with an examination of conditions in Soviet Russia (which has changed his view on Bolshevik government, as he has been candidly recording in "The Nation"), is now on his way to another disturbed area—China. China is drawing all our talents to the east, and Russell is to lecture in Peking. I suppose he will lecture on

mathematics. Meanwhile, a new book of his, a very important book, will be published some time this year or next. It is a searching study of mental processes, based upon a series of lectures recently delivered in London. The title is "The Analysis of Mind".

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Reference to foreign climes reminds me that our writers are still going abroad for their local color. Brett Young, now resident in Capri, is at work upon a new novel of extraordinary adventure. It is full of strong meat, and is likely to realize the dream he has had ever since he wrote "The Crescent Moon", of writing a real "shocker". Such news fills me with anticipations. But besides this Brett Young is set on a new form of art altogether—nothing less than a triptych of tales dealing with emotional episodes in the life of women. It is a scene which will offer plenty of scope to his talent and it may well produce something noteworthy. He intends proceeding shortly to Zululand. Thus we see that there are still many continents for the more vigorous writers of our day to explore. We need never fear that adventure, or the spirit of adventure, is dead, for where there is the will to find new fields there must be the essential energy to conquer them in the realm of letters. A nice little drama of Zululand, written by one who has always shown a taste for literature as a living exercise, holds all the riches of life. For Brett Young agrees with the dwarf in Grimm's Tales, quoted so appositely on the title-page of Conrad's "Youth", who said that something human was dearer to him than all the wealth of the Orient. It is not as though we are likely to lose a novelist in the painter of fresh woods and pastures new. More power to the author who has the

courage to step outside of the domestic interior and take his life in both hands for the sake of his art.

I have already said that Mackenzie is going to the South Seas on just such an exploit. What is not so generally known is that he will be accompanied by Eric Brett Young, the brother of the novelist, himself a writer of talent, and in fact a collaborator in his brother's "first novel". Eric Brett Young collaborated also in a critical study of Robert Bridges, but since then the two brothers have worked upon separate lines. They are extremely unlike in appearance and character, and most of Eric's work has been critical. He may still emerge as a creative writer, and then we should indeed have an interesting comparison to make between the two.

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Since I last wrote, the Hawthornden prize for the most notable piece of creative work of the year has been presented for the second time. Much innocent heart-burning has thus been allayed. I believe I prognosticated that the prize would go to the "Poems" of John Freeman. It has done so. It was presented to Mr. Freeman by Gilbert Murray, who spoke, suggestively enough, of the reassurance the recipient would feel in days of gloom when he recalled that a book of his had been so crowned. I notice in "The Athenæum" a pertinent inquiry as to the exact scope of the prize. It has twice been given to a poetical work, and all that has been written in prose has, it would appear, been ignored. "The Athenæum" suggests that Virginia Woolf's novel, "Night and Day", was more deserving than the "Poems" of Mr. Freeman of the prize. At least it would be good if the question could be settled. I was told of one author who asked if he had won the prize.

He was informed of my dictum. His remark in reply was so singular that I cannot print it here. When I heard of this episode I immediately asked why my own most recent work had not been honored. This young man's answer to my question was still more singular (but printable). He said: "Oh, but he's too successful." All the same, that answer has in itself one very definite point. One consideration which the judges must always bear in mind is precisely this.

It is not sentimental to suggest that if two writers are of equal merit (supposing such a thing can be conceived, when merit is so loose a term to cover different manifestations, even in the same genre, of creative talent), the prize should be given to the one of them most in need of the money, or the one whose circumstances would make him the more appreciative of its financial aspect. I feel sure that the prize was never intended for anybody who would put the hundred pounds into his bank and forget that it was there. Nobody, therefore, imagined that it would go to any of our much boomed young novelists. There is, however, a sensible body of novelists who do not earn their keep, and it would have been nice to see one of this band receive, not only the money, but the fillip which one supposes the honor of this prize to give to any writer who wins it. But perhaps there is no such fillip? I can remember that the Polignac prize was given first of all to Walter de la Mare for his book "The Return". A friend of mine who recently bought that strange and delightful book was amazed to find that the copy he received was still one of the first edition. Can it be that the general public takes no notice of such awards? If so, it is very hard, because while I do not believe the usual



tales of languishing merit, it is quite certain that many good writers find it difficult to get a large hearing, and some of them may be discouraged from the pursuit of their ambition by the meagre monetary returns. I can think of one or two women novelists, for instance, who have had a really hard struggle, and at least one of these, of quite respectable gifts, has recently declared her intention of abandoning the effort. She may be right, but I believe she is wrong. A certain amount of application is necessary to the writer who would achieve success, but given application, I seem to notice success coming to all sorts of second-rate writers.

Well, there is the question. If a prize is merely an honor recognized by a few hundred people, and if it has no volitional or galvanic power, the value of the prize is diminished. If it is a hundred pounds it should go to the persons who can best appreciate a hundred pounds. But both these circumstances disappoint me in a way, because it seems to me that they make the whole affair too local. I am not questioning the deserts of Mr. Freeman, although I find his enormous book of poems profoundly depressing in its want of lightness; and I do not object to the disappointment of those who thought they had performed works of such surpassing merit as to be deserving of the prize. What disappoints me is the fear that the prize-winner may not benefit as distinctly as such honor ought to enable him to do (at least one distinguished writer of my acquaintance had never heard of the Hawthornden prize), and, in this instance, the feeling that it is a pity that it should for the second time have been given to a work of poetry. In saying that I must admit that I know of no work of fiction specially

deserving of the prize—unless it be Catherine Carswell's "Open the Door"—and no work at all to which I would myself have given a prize. But then I would never give a prize for any book.

Prizes are for the encouragement of good work. I find that in the case of the Hawthornden prize no thought of good work has occurred to the minds of the younglings who think they should have been crowned. They have just turned out what they would ordinarily have written, and have then fixed greedy eyes upon an additional bonus. This is not as it should be. Of Mr. Freeman's disinterestedness I have absolutely no doubt; and it is therefore not unfair that one who has persistently followed his own course, and has met until recently with neglect, should have a prize. I wish his work were less solemn, that it were less dull; but if these defects are inseparable from poetic sincerity, then it is better that one who has genuinely worked, with a kind of distinction, for the love of his art, should score off all his more facile and ambitious rivals. We may be sure that in poetry at any rate the judges have taken all likely works into consideration. I do not observe on the committee the name of one whose opinion of a novel is practical. But if the prize is to be given to a work of poetic value I cannot conceive who have a better right to judge than those who form the committee.

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A new biography of Dostoyevsky has been written by the great novelist's daughter. It is written in French, but has not yet been published in that language. Oddly enough, it makes its first appearance in German, and is issued in the first instance both in Germany and Switzerland. Arrangements have been made for an

English version, and while the book is composed in a simple style which approaches baldness, it has the merit of being based upon actual knowledge. In any case, it is bound to be a most useful aid to the coming English or American biographer, and it may have on its own account considerable value.

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Biography is a curious kind of writing. Very rarely is it the work of people of imagination and insight. Far too seldom. No branch of letters calls for more understanding, and yet we are fobbed off again and again with the serious and discreet efforts of men and women who never, in an imaginative sense, get anywhere near the mentality of their subjects. One recent biography had the further disadvantage of being rejected by one publisher on the ground that it did not make a sufficiently obvious hero of its subject. The book was thought immoral, because it was truthful. It had further to be postponed for years (when it found a publisher who was not too squeamish) in order that the two sisters of the subject might be allowed to die without having their

equanimity ruffled by any of the disclosures made in its pages. Truly, the biographer has no easy time. I have heard that Mr. Gosse's "Father and Son", although written some time before publication, was held up for reasons not altogether dissimilar. What a strange thing it is that we have not yet reached a comprehension of the fact that men are men, and not the idols of our dreams. My own biography will never be written. I am glad of it. I could not bear to think of the strange abortion I should appear in its pages, with all my wickedness softened and omitted lest some surviving relative should be shocked at the revelation of my natural weaknesses. I wonder how some of our leaders will fare. In the case of a biography of a leading politician, published within his lifetime, the subject was so shocked at the candid use of the material supplied by himself that he withdrew his patronage from the book, which thereafter had to be written out of the author's head, was undocumented, and became steadily less flattering as a result, though less destructive in self-disclosure.

SIMON PURE

## ON CERTAIN BOOKS OF THE FALL

BY WILLIAM ROSE BENET

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IT must seem worthy of remark, to anyone who has followed the book seasons recently, that the past summer showed no such perceptible slackening in publishers' efforts as has heretofore been characteristic. There would seem to be a tendency to extend what has formerly been thought of as the spring season into the summer and, on the other hand, to start the fall season, so-called, earlier than usual. This development is decidedly interesting. Probably certain months will always remain better periods in which to sell books, but the lines of demarcation are growing much less sharp. A brisk, all-year-round interest in books would appear to be a not impossible future situation in the United States. And this is the goal, certainly, toward which the recent national campaign of book advertising projected by the book trade, is aiming with its new organizations.

During August a number of important books appeared. Nexö's novel, the first of what is to be, I understand, a four-volume work of fiction, "Ditte: Girl Alive", may be taken as an example of the type of book that has somewhat antedated its ordinary season. "Atlantida", Pierre Benoit's novel to which the French Academy awarded the Grand Prix du Roman,

appeared in translation at the end of July. These are fair illustrations.

But naturally the reading public will display a quickened interest in books with the approach of less enervating weather and the return from vacations. In glancing over what the publishers promise for the fall, with an inclusion of some books that will have appeared before this article does, the prospect is most interesting. It is impossible to be at all comprehensive in such an article as this, but if we can loiter through the fall catalogues as through a shop, among shelves where the books mentioned (we will imagine) are already displayed, we may gain a little clearer idea of what is offered and analyze some general tendencies as well as turn over the leaves of particular volumes.

We are bound to find the section devoted to psychic and spiritist literature considerably expanded. Interest in psychic books was one of the most outstanding results of the war and they flooded the market during the past spring and early summer. And still they come. They range from the most pathetic maunderings and sentimental drivel to the most sincere and interesting personal experiences and summaries of research. The discussion of life after death, or the opposite, is