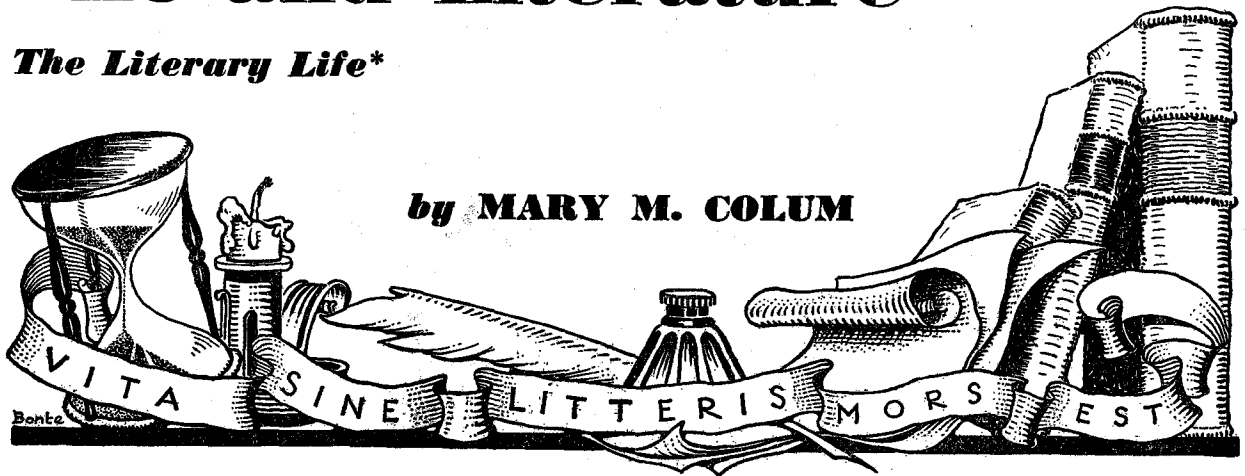


# Life and Literature

## *The Literary Life\**

by MARY M. COLUM



**A**T NO VERY remote date the literary world in every country was composed of people all of whom had heard of each other and who were, to some extent, familiar with each other's work. This was true not only for all the writers in any one country but even of those of foreign countries: an English or an American writer would be known to French or German writers and vice versa; a new writer of power would be known from his initial publication. Now, at the present moment, the literary world is a vast, miscellaneous crowd, composed for the most part of writers who have very little connection with literature. The artist-writers who used to make up the whole literary world are now a fraction of it, and their work is getting crowded out and is either ignored or half-ignored in the medley of books turned out by all sorts and conditions of people on all sorts of subjects.

Books are now published in such multitudes that even the most omnivorous reader can get through only a small percentage of them, and even all the book reviewers together cannot cope with the output. Book publishing is getting completely out of hand; nobody seems to be able to control the production any more; nobody wants such numbers of books but nobody can stop their publication. It is the same story with many other things in this civilization: nobody wants so many ships built or so many cars constructed or such quantities

of munitions manufactured but nobody can halt their production. In the same way, nobody wants war but nobody seems to be able to stop the world or portions of the world from heading towards it.

In the literary world, though, part of the trouble undoubtedly comes from the increased commercial nature of publishing; a part of it certainly comes from the fact that we have an insufficient number of all-round experts in literature. We have too many specialists, or, anyhow, people trying to specialize, and not enough of those with sufficient breadth of mind and extensiveness of training to be able to resolve the problem as a whole — the sort of mind which can relate a book to the past, to the needs of the moment, to its value to the publisher, writer, and reader. Most of the books published are by people who have nothing significant to say; they die after a couple of weeks or a couple of months, and when read at all are read by people who could write as good or even better books themselves. No nutriment is provided for the readers.

The necessity for some form of book control for the benefit of both reader and writer is becoming evident, but how that control can best be exercised is a difficult matter to work out. We have forms of crop control, food control, fuel control, wage control; the expressions "planned society," "planned economy" are becoming familiar to everybody. The physical needs of people are being planned for everywhere; their intellectual and psychic needs are being largely ignored. Some of the big publishing firms are really factories for turning out books; they can give very little attention to a

\*EDITOR'S NOTE: — *The recent books referred to in this article include Amy Lowell: a Chronicle, by S. Foster Damon (Houghton Mifflin, \$5.00); Epitaph on George Moore, by Charles Morgan (Macmillan, \$1.25); Irish Literary Portraits, by John Eglinton (Macmillan, \$2.00); If It Die, by André Gide (Random House, \$5.00); Prophets and Poets, by André Maurois (Harper, \$3.00); What Is a Book? edited by Dale Warren (Houghton Mifflin, \$3.00).*

## LIFE AND LITERATURE

first-class work because they bring out such a vast array of the fifth rate and the tenth rate. The bulk of stuff published makes very little money for either author or publisher, and the reason for the publication of a lot of it is that printing presses have to be kept going, just as the assembly plant for cars has to be kept going. This is bad for the reading public and calamitous for real writers.

### THE ARTIST'S UNEASY LIFE

A WRITER's life is very seldom an easy one; it is filled with disappointments and, excepting in rare cases, is lacking in security of every kind; it is considered romantic by people who have entered very little into it and is looked on as an easy path to fame and fortune by others. Some few writers achieve fame; a good many more have a wide publicity, which is a very different thing, but few make much of an income. The chance of making money out of a book is less than getting money by buying a lottery ticket; of the two I should recommend the lottery ticket as the least uncertain. Even a first-class writer's reputation is likely to decline as he becomes an accepted figure and as fashions in writing change.

Any art is a dangerous occupation, and I can imagine no change in civilization that would make it otherwise; the demand on spiritual endurance, on nervous energy, on sensibility, on response to life is so great. The strain, the uncertainty, the anxiety, the hidden shapes of envy are at least twice as numerous as they would be in any other profession. In addition to talent or genius, real writing demands a sense of responsibility and integrity in every sense of that word; it demands from the writer that rarest of all powers — of being himself, of being perfectly naturally a person. It demands of that self, that natural self, that it be sufficiently strong and powerful to impress itself on thought, words, and language.

This power of impressing personality on language is one of the strangest and most inexplicable in the world of the mind. The very same words in the very same order can be used by two people, and in one case they will leave no impression and in another they will outlive the monuments of princes. Any number of people must have used the words, "Queens have died young and fair," but it was when they were used by Nash, when he put into them

some strange aroma of personality, that they became immortal literature —

Queens have died young and fair,  
Dust hath closed Helen's eye.

And the same can be said of numerous lines of Wordsworth.

There are before me at the moment several books which have to do with the literary life in some shape or form. One of the most interesting and instructive of them is *Amy Lowell: a Chronicle*, by Foster Damon. Amy Lowell was an artist of the kind whose value lasts for only a brief period. She was valuable and influential as a writer for about ten years but she has left very little that is likely to survive for any length of time. There is one poem of hers, *Patterns*, which has survived for about twenty years and is likely to survive for a long time yet; it is the only one of her poems which seems to me to be really a poem. Yet in her lifetime, as her biographer shows, a great many people were excited by her, and would flock to hear her read her verse and discuss literature. For a brief period she was undoubtedly a power.

A woman of strong intellect, she could have been of more value to her time and in the end to herself if she had been less interested in herself and her own reputation. But she was determined to sell herself as a poet and as a writer to the public and she was exceedingly energetic and resourceful in her efforts. The seriousness with which she took her work and with which she arranged her time was surpassed only by her fellow New Englander, Gamaliel Bradford. Daytime was too distracting for the production of these works of hers, so she wrote at night and slept in the daytime, leaving what she produced in sheets for secretaries to type out the next day. Could one imagine Keats or Goethe or Racine being so concerned about getting out what was in them?

In spite of the record of some generosity to fellow writers, I doubt very seriously if Amy Lowell ever squandered either her money or her time or herself, and, in the end, it is to the squanderers that art gives everything, to those who, for some space of their lives, anyhow, have recklessly given of themselves or their time or their love or their sympathy or their worldly goods — it is they who can say, "What I gave I have, what I saved I lost." For the life of the spirit has different rules from the practical life: she was too close to her thrifty New England

## THE FORUM

ancestors to realize this — to John Lowell, the cooper, who was the first of the family to go to Harvard, who became a clergyman, a man of property, and who “found no inconsistency between worldliness and spirituality.”

There are no more interesting pages in Foster Damon's book than those in which he describes the Lawrences and Lowells who were Amy's ancestors, from the first Percival Lowell who emigrated from England in 1639: the family chronicle is indeed fascinating despite that solemn genealogy, going back to the Conqueror or Charlemagne, which is so naturally acquired at the office of a king-at-arms. I myself have heard her say with acerbity and perhaps without precisely meaning it, “My ancestors were all lower-middle-class people like those of everyone else in New England.” She herself was distinctly an aristocratic type — not the genteel aristocrat but the dashing one. Outside her intellectual life and her reputation as a writer she cared very little what people thought of her; she had an aristocratic directness of speech and manner, she was spirited, she was large-minded, and she occasionally exercised the *grande dame's* privilege of swearing like a trooper and of being vulgar when it suited her. Still it must be owned that at times she showed the country cousin's attitude toward European writers and English intellectual institutions.

### THE PASSION FOR BEING NOTED

SHE THOUGHT of herself as a great poet and was determined that the public should think likewise. On any general program she insisted on being given the place of honor. There is a convention in this country that the guest of honor appears last. Once, as an amateur impresario of a poetry reading in New York for the benefit of an artist's colony, I asked Amy Lowell to be amongst the readers. She telephoned me in the small hours of the morning, probably forgetting that, unlike her, I slept at night, and asked that she be given the last place on the program. John Farrar and John Weaver had been placed at the end of the program, as they were staging an experiment in reading poetry to the accompaniment of a dancer, dancing the rhythms with a complex lighting effect; and I judged that after this performance the mood of the audience for listening to any more poetry would be broken. She insisted, however, that the place of honor

was last and that she must be the last reader. The result was that after the dancer the audience was not in a mood for poetry and proceeded to leave when Amy began to recite. After this she never spoke to me nor communicated with me again.

Consistent with her sense of her own importance were the plans she made for this biography of her, keeping a record of all her doings, a file of letters written to her and by her, and newspaper notices of her books and other activities. She spared no pains to make all her work known and even arranged for a translation into French of her *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, paying for the translation.

Her books in prose were efficient, scholarly, and informing, and, although her *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* is now a little dated and her *Six French Poets* journalistic and somewhat superficial, both books repay reading. She was a splendid platform speaker and always presented an excellent evening's entertainment. She had a lecture, “American Poets of Today,” a portion of which is reproduced in this book, which must have been the best that her audience had ever heard on the subject. The lectures on French poetry which later formed *Six French Poets* were informing and lucid, though showing a puzzlement at the religious affiliation of her poets. As an editor of a literary review, an idea which from time to time she played with, she would have been of great importance at that period, for both by instinct and training she knew a great deal about literature, and her advice was always valuable. Among the letters reprinted in this volume is one to a sister of a would-be poet, showing the difference between art and self-expression, which in its common sense, its inside understanding of art is one of those pieces of writing which should be presented to every aspiring author. At the same time, she often failed to apply the sound advice she gave to others to herself, through her desire to be a figure of importance.

While in our civilization it is women oftener than men who are subject to an exaggerated desire for importance, outstanding men writers often make a fuss about their prestige and reputation. George Moore, who is the subject of a small book (*Epitaph on George Moore*) by Charles Morgan, the author of *The Fountain*, was just as concerned as Amy



## LIFE AND LITERATURE

Lowell and just as capable of making an arrangement that he would be the chief figure on a program or a table of contents. Once, when some young writers in Dublin were bringing out a magazine in which to publish their own work, George Moore presented them out of his drawer with an ancient manuscript of a realistic short story called "The Flood," which, as it happened, they were delighted to get. But he summoned the editors to his house and insisted that this story be printed in the front pages of the magazine. Without asking, he probably would have been given that place, but he wanted no mistake.

Like Amy Lowell he wrote letters with an eye to their being included in a biography. Like her, he had an independent income, and this, in both cases, was responsible for much of the fuss that they made about themselves. His literary advice was deeper and sounder than hers, for he had a larger experience of writers and writing. In fact, no one could be on the fringe of that entourage of writers whose elders were composed of himself, A. E., Yeats, and Synge without learning in a year more about literature than one could learn in a study in ten or even twenty years.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-RENEWAL

**T**HE MAN WHO, first of all, was to be his biographer was John Eglinton, to whom he devoted pages in *Hail and Farewell* and who is a well-known Dublin critic. Though this project fell through and Moore fastened on Charles Morgan, the pages in Eglinton's *Irish Literary Portraits* dealing with Moore are more illuminating than anything in this little book of Morgan's, though they are not dazzlingly illuminating at that. However, they are superior to *Epitaph on George Moore* for the reason that Eglinton knew George Moore during some of the salient years of his life, while Morgan knew him only after he had left Ireland for good, a crusty old conservative.

But the Moore of real importance to literature is the man who wrote *Hail and Farewell*, a book whose influence on the modern novel would require an article in itself. The author of *Hail and Farewell* is a writer outside the English tradition of novel writing, who did not really believe that the English could write novels and who was able to convince such a typical English writer as Arnold Bennett that

he, Moore, was a greater novelist than Thackeray. George Moore was an Irish country gentleman, not an Anglo-Irish country gentleman, with the subtle and strong intelligence that is the result of generations of cultivated minds. He had the Irish-Celtic mentality, which is so akin to the French-Celtic mentality, and his distinguished art and technique was a cross between the art and technique of a Mayo shanachie and of a French realistic novelist, inclining at times more to one than to the other.

The lady who declined to give Charles Morgan the letters that Moore declared were necessary for a real biography had a sound critical sense, for it is obvious that Morgan's insight into his subject is limited. There was only one side of George Moore that he understood well, and that was the writer with the infallible instinct for self-renewal. The passion for self-renewal, Morgan says, would have been the theme of the biography of Moore that he might have written. He never knew a man in whom the impulse for self-renewal was so strong and so continuous.

To study him and his work was to be instructed in the innermost meaning and penalties of self-discipline and self-creation.

Now, obviously, whether or not such a book would have been a veritable biography of George Moore, it might have been a contribution to criticism. Whenever artists come to an end in their work, reach a stop in their development, it has always seemed to me that this happened through their placing too much value on the problem of discipline and too little on the problem of self-creation or self-renewal. This, perhaps, is true of any profession or any art, including the art of living. When self-creation or self-renewal ends, the artist has nothing more to contribute, and this explains why certain others can go on creating until extreme old age.

### THE CONFESSIONS OF AN INVERT

**T**HE IDEAL biography of any artist would, of course, have to be more than an account of his instinct for self-renewal; it would have to be an account of how he molded himself to what is essentially himself—to quote Mallarmé's line from his sonnet on Poe, "Tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le change." Now it has to be said for Gide's *If It Die* that the writer does give the sense of an individual

molding himself into a distinctive kind of being. Something is being molded in this book: a neurotic, hypochondriac little boy into a neurotic artist of strange gifts, with strong tendencies to homosexuality — a severe ascetic on one side, a gross sensualist on the other, which seems to be the usual Puritan mentality: it is a combination which I have little sympathy with and little comprehension of. He writes of a lust, both normal and abnormal, which is without love; a perpetual anxiety seems to be the master passion of his mind. The characters in his books are deadly egoists who imagine that they and their souls are of more importance to the God of whom they are always thinking than the souls of their lovers and friends. Like all the Puritans, he is haunted by the Bible, and can find some passages in Scripture to explain most of his inclinations and acts.

The title of this confession-autobiography is from the saying of St. John's, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but, if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit," and the interpretation he puts on it is that the human being must have many experiences of sin and sensuality before reaching the summits. Gide has tried pretty nearly everything himself in the way of experiences and has now, towards the end of his life, joined the communists — this, doubtless, as with everything else he has done, to see what sort of fruit it will bring forth in his mind. And, doubtless, as with all his other experiences, this will result in renewed conflict. In his early book, *Les Cahiers d'André Walter*, the hero declares, "I have never had any happiness that my reason did not disapprove of," and this sentiment is a sort of refrain through all his books.

Critics among his own countrymen — and among critics are his greatest admirers — have described him as a mixture of Nietzsche, Dostoevski, and Racine, the last ingredient probably to account for the beauty, the clarity, and the poetry of his style. For whatever are Gide's drawbacks, and one has constantly the impression that these are all related to a barrenness of mind which prevents him forever from being reckoned with the first-rate contemporary writers, he is a master of language and is able to translate into words the most mysterious and neurotic shudderings of the mind and the senses. This autobiography was

written several years ago, but the subject of the latter half of it made it such that it could only now be translated into English. This portion of it gives one reader at least the impression of watching man being molded into vampire. There is no place in literature for many revelations of this kind.

## THE GREATEST LIVING ENGLISH WRITER?

IT IS WITH some relief that one turns to Maurois' essays on English writers and to the Boy Scoutism of Rudyard Kipling and H. G. Wells, generally so irritating, but welcome as a change from the homosexuality of Gide. Maurois, who is a versatile and not very profound writer, has something enlightening to say on most of the subjects he touches, and this in spite of what seems to be his fixed determination to alienate nobody and to carry a sort of provincial-tea-table tact into the examination of the minds of the most important writers.

This book, which was called in French *Magiciens et Logiciens*, is turned into English "Prophets and Poets," thus giving the reader a false impression of what Maurois is trying to reveal about his subjects. He does not put forward his subjects as the prophets who made this age; he has merely written a series of essays, originally given as lectures, on certain well-known English writers with whose work Maurois happens to be familiar. They also happen to be the writers that the average cultivated reader has read and is familiar with; that reader will discover here what he has always thought, or been taught to think, about these writers — Kipling, Wells, Shaw, Chesterton, Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, and so on.

There is one essay, however, that is important and worth all the rest of the series, and that is the opening one on Rudyard Kipling: if this can do something to restore the prestige of that great writer, the greatest living English writer, Maurois' book will have been worth writing. When he explains Kipling's heroic conception of life and his power as a myth-maker, when he talks of his "instinctive and enduring contact with the oldest and deepest layers of human consciousness," he touches the secret of Kipling's extraordinary genius — a genius which so many of the younger generation have hardly been aware of because of that shocking habit of critics of perpetually stressing a writer's faults when once he has become a

## I SENT MY FATHER TO AN OLD MEN'S HOME

figure and stressing, in Kipling's case, that Boy Scout imperialism which, after all, was a partial manifestation of his heroic quality. Some of the attacks on highly gifted writers are enough to convert one completely to Victor Hugo's opinion that it would be well for criticism to admire genius en bloc, to confess that its defects are the conditions of its excellencies, and to realize that one ought to take it or leave it without futile, niggling faultfindings.

As a pendant to all these books dealing with the literary life there is one, *What Is a Book?*, which ought to be read by anyone interested in the profession of authorship. It is true that the symposium leads off badly with an insubstantial and long-winded essay, but several of the succeeding ones bear reading more than once. The writers in this symposium are all professionals; they all know what they are talking about; and particular phases of writing

are dealt with skillfully, convincingly, and interestingly: of them I should mention Rafael Sabatini on historical fiction, Harold Nicholson on biography, Valentine Williams on crime fiction, Archibald MacLeish and Frances Frost on poetry. Phyllis Bottome's "Responsibilities of an Artist" is one of the best pieces of writing on that subject that I have ever read, and it convinces one that this writer has it in her to write better novels than she has yet produced. Havelock Ellis' "The Artist in Words" and John Livingstone Lowes's "The Reading of Books" are, as one might expect, outstandingly excellent. As one reads these diverse writers, one notices that one author's name is mentioned again and again — that of Henry James. And this means that this great craftsman has an everyday influence upon the writers of the present time — an everyday, workaday influence unsuspected by most critics.

# I Sent My Father to an Old Men's Home

ANONYMOUS

**F**ATHER DOESN'T live here any more.

Although we have become the subjects of horror-stricken comment and even some alienation of affection among our friends, we have sent my father to a home for old men. We could no longer keep him with us and preserve our sanity.

In a certain class of people it seems possible to rob a bank or, in another, to kill a little baby for the coral on its neck and still maintain friendly relations with one's neighbors and intimate associates. Among our class, which is the higher middle group, it seems impossible to keep the regard

of one's fellows and still to provide for an aging parent by sending him to a place where others are paid to look after him.

We did not send Father to the poorhouse or the county farm. That would have been unkind.

We are paying for his room and board at a private establishment where we or anyone else can visit him whenever it pleases, from which he can go out to visit whenever he desires, and where his companions are of his own station in life. Nevertheless, we are looked upon by our friends as archfiends. I am an ungrateful daughter who has "taken every-

