

# AMERICA AND THE ENGLISH LITERARY TRADITION

BY VINCENT O'SULLIVAN

To encounter the venerable names of Marlowe, of Burton of the *Anatomy*, of Dr. Johnson, and Wordsworth and George Borrow, in a quite modern American novel, is almost as startling as it would be to find them in a Bolshevik manifesto. Rare enough now in America are the writers who continue the English literary tradition, and accordingly some interest may be felt by English people in the one who does. Nor is Mr. Christopher Morley—a 'left-over' from the New England period when the inspiration, at least, of American literature was imported from England, if it sometimes suffered a sea-change in the process.

Some years ago I was asked to lunch in New York at a restaurant in the neighborhood of Wall Street—one of those places where eating becomes feeding; where, as in a pew, men close-packed in a small room groan and sweat as they devour probable dishes while flying scuds of soup and gravy are blown in the face from plates carried at perilous angles by irritable and distracted waiters. It has always seemed to me an example of the great docility of the Americans and their slavery to custom that men should consent to go day after day for years to such caves of noise and fumes and half-warm food, when they might have a sandwich in peace on a street corner. My host was a large florid young man rather ample in movement for the place, who looked as if he might have seized the restaurant in his arms and swung it across the river to the Brooklyn side. So far as looks go, he was the

kind of man you may meet on any misty morning in Essex or Suffolk riding about his farm on a stocky well-groomed cob or trampling through the wurzels in thick boots and buskins with a gun under his arm and a dog at his heels. This was Mr. Christopher Morley, sometime one of the editors of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and now an imposing pillar of the Philadelphia *Evening Ledger*. Amid the uproar, he gained my sympathy by calling *The Woman in White* one of the best English novels. He spoke warmly, too, of Anthony Trollope. I cannot read Trollope much, but I like people who like him. I suppose we all feel that way about some writer or other.

At the time of our lunch Mr. Morley had published in magazines some parts of his book of poems, *Songs for a Little House*, whereof the inspiration takes its rise in the English intimists, Herrick, George Herbert, Cowper, Crabbe. He has since written a few books of essays (or, as one would say in America, 'near-essays') whereof the inspiration is the prose counterpart of those worthies, Izaak Walton, Addison (of Sir Roger de Coverley), Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt, with something of Hazlitt and George Borrow thrown in. As you see, nothing could be more English. And as one reads these books, *Shandy-gaff* and *Parnassus on Wheels*, it is easy to pick out his preferences among modern English authors. Stevenson, Kipling, Conrad, Chesterton, J. M. Barrie—there they are! It may be in deference to his surroundings that he professes an inordinate admiration for

that didactic and boring writer, Samuel Butler — him of *Erewhon* and *The Way of All Flesh* — I mean: heaven forbid that anybody should think I mean the great author of *Hudibras*. Samuel Butler the second (in all senses) has at present a considerable vogue in the United States.

Such a list of preferences describes a man. You notice that if there is no Hall Caine there is no Galsworthy; if there is no Florence Barclay there is no Bernard Shaw; if there is no Arnold Bennett or Algernon Blackwood neither is there Mrs. Humphry Ward or William Locke. No non-English writers whatever, none of the great Russians, none of the great French, have said anything important for him. I have a notion that he regards Ibsen and Strindberg with dislike as not the kind of stuff that young America can be profitably nourished upon. His admiration of his own countrymen is also tempered by many exclusions. Among those he admires he takes a long slide from Walt Whitman to Mr. Don Marquis, who distributed parodies and proverbs to the readers of the *New York Sun*. According to Mr. Morley, the facetious Mr. Marquis is the greatest writer, except Walt Whitman, who ever lived in the Brooklyn district of New York. This is perhaps not much of a claim; but however that may be, it falls to be said that Howard Pyle, admirable writer of fairy stories, of pirate romances, admirable black-and-white artist, too, lived in Brooklyn, and if he were still treading its streets, neither Mr. Marquis nor many other Americans would be worthy to walk in his shadow.

It has seemed worth while to dwell on Mr. Christopher Morley's literary formation because of his expression of the English literary tradition, which is indeed so singular in America to-day that one is not much surprised to learn

that he is not very far off the original English stock — only a single generation, I think. He has also been a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, and although in his latest book he calls a college-cap a 'mortar-board,' no doubt he came into sufficiently close contact with the real life of the place. He waxes enthusiastic about tea and muffins and open coal fires. Tea rouses no delight in the American breast, muffins mean something else than they do in England, and open coal fires are a privilege of the rich. He is in his books a great eater, his board is spread with a Victorian prodigality. To his mind, when the English Victorian era ended, something very good went out of the world. There is nothing in him that Victorianism would have frustrated: he does not want to do or express anything which would have shocked the Victorian sense of fitness. I do not know whether he would want to put drawers on the legs of the piano, but he would not want to discuss the subject of legs, or anything which may be implied in that.

Do what we will, we see past ages through the eyes of the great writers who lived in them. In Victorian England fires were not so bright, inns were not so cosy, food was not so plentiful or so good as appears in the romances of Dickens. At the time of the Crimean War the struggles of the poor were as hard and more hopeless than they are now. What is likely is that middle-class people of moderate incomes lived more comfortably than they do to-day. When the Mr. and Mrs. Quiverfull or the Brown, Jones and Robinson, of the *Punch* of the period went to Margate or Folkestone their desires were moderate: there were no large and expensive hotels to tempt them. At home, they were content to stay at home and to take their meals at home. They asked less from

life and probably got more. But to see general happiness in the Victorian period is hallucination produced by literature, as it is to see general comfort in the Augustan period because Horace was comfortable. Seventy-five years hence readers of the books of Mr. Bennett and Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Wells may be sighing for the good old times of King George the Fifth and the Great War.

And if such a reader lives in America and takes Mr. Morley on trust he may — he almost certainly will — be sighing for the good old days of Woodrow Wilson. Mr. Morley is by no means a realist, if realism means facing unflinchingly the sad and ugly among the other elements of life. He puts aside whatever is unpleasant, and, one can see in many another American author, this is done by conviction, deliberately, like the effort of a Christian Scientist. He belongs to the domestic school; he is a homely writer. He tells you what they had for breakfast from sheer delight in telling it. People don't catch diseases in his book. They are very well. The doctor only comes to preside at the arrival of a new and healthy baby.

On the whole, if we want only the fair lights, Mr. Morley gives a true enough picture of the middle-class family in the United States — or more precisely, of the family of small means in New England and the Middle Atlantic States. In one respect, at all events, it seems to have an advantage over the same kind of family in England. The *tone* is better because there are no cheap servants. The wealthy have servants more or less good and highly paid. In families such as Mr. Morley deals with, the wife, and often the husband, do their own cooking and dishwashing, and then sit down to read *The Shaving of Shagpat* or Bryce's *American Commonwealth*. What is

called a 'scrub woman' appears at intervals to sweep and garnish, but she enters the house on the same terms as the plumber or the man who comes to fix the telephone. But there is no such thing as the 'slavey,' or overworked drudge, tyrannized over when she is not treated with negligent kindness, who surrenders her liberty, often even her liberty of thought, for a meagre wage, and in a tiny house is barred out from the rest of the occupants though the dog and the cat are admitted. When you think of it, could anything be more immoral? Or could anything be devised more demoralizing and productive of snobbery than to bring up children in the conviction that they are superior to a class of human beings who are paid to do housework, and also to those who cannot afford to keep such slaves?

The small American family, then, with its economized and tempered joys, and with the characteristic national neglect of its sorrows, is portrayed by Mr. Morley in his poems, in *Shandygaff*, which is a book of essays, and in *Parnassus on Wheels*, which may also be called a book of essays since the characters are set up to express the author's opinions. The best part of his new book, *The Haunted Bookshop*, is also the essay part; but he has had the unfortunate suggestion to graft on it a 'thriller,' and for that kind of literature he reveals no talent. Two Germans plot together to put a bomb between book covers on board the ship in which President Wilson is sailing to the Peace Conference. They are unmasked by an advertising agent who marries the heroine daughter of a millionaire. What motive could have urged the Germans to injure the President at that particular moment it is impossible to discover; but why try to find sense where the author has failed to put any? It would seem that his admira-

tion of *The Wrong Box* and *The Dynamo* had led him to prepare an American *Ersatz* for those books; but neither his character nor his talent have any resemblance to Stevenson's. To go no further, Stevenson never loses a chance to gird at domesticity, whereas Mr. Morley's trump card is to extol domesticity.

To excuse his descent into spy-melodrama, it should be said that he is not a writer who takes his way indifferent to the public taste, and in the United States during the war Hun-baiting and spy-nosing were not only pursued as a duty but cultivated as a sport. Curiously enough, alongside of this kind of thing we find praise of such writers as Bertrand Russell, and pages denouncing war. Certainly, no one can reproach Mr. Morley for his observations on the war and on war in general. But repetitions like this are useless; his remarks are no more impressive than could be drawn from writers for a thousand years. Perhaps there are few left now who believe that war brings any permanent social benefit; but soldiering, or at least officering, will doubtless continue to be the most honorable and admired of professions in many countries, and did not Marshal Foch in London speak calmly of the 'next war'? As for what are called 'war books,' whether written from the pacifist or bellicist point of view, more or less brilliant reporting with emphatic or cynical anecdotes, surely there has been enough of them in the United States as well as in France and in England. But one kind of war book might still be written, and if it were done well, with some benefit. We have every reason to be tired of the note books and journals of nurses of all sorts written to show the home town they have been 'there.'

So much consideration it has seemed worth while to give to this American

writer in an English paper, not upon any claim that what he has so far produced makes him a great or important writer, but because he is a pleasant writer, with whose books English readers might well make acquaintance, and particularly because he is one of the very few American writers who continue the English literary tradition in a country where that tradition is dying fast and where the spoken, and to a considerable extent the written, language is drawing farther and farther away from English as it is used in England. Those who want to realize how far this difference has already gone should read Mr. H. L. Mencken's laborious and interesting volume, *The American Language*. To most English people, many pages of the published sermons of Billy Sunday, the evangelist would be almost as unintelligible as a Welsh newspaper. But is American at its present point of development a language or a lingo? Professor Brander Matthews, an American, does not hesitate to liken it to Elizabethan English for its figurative vigor. American figures, however, are generally on a low level. When Bacon calls floods great winding sheets, he is otherwise impressive than when the Pennsylvania Railroad announces that there is a wash-out down round Harrisburg, Pa. It would in fact be impossible to express any grand or moving thought in American: humor, homely wisdom, yes; but not grandeur. Leaving aside the intellectual value of either, Bishop Latimer's sermons are in the plain language of his time, and they easily maintain themselves on heights that Billy Sunday never gets a clutch on, even for a moment. It is a fair claim that American is more vivid than English. Mr. Mencken says well that between the placard in the wash-room at the British Museum: 'These Basins are for Casual Ablutions

Only,' and the common sign at our American railroad crossings: 'Stop! Look! Listen!' lies 'an abyss separating two cultures, two habits of mind, two diverging tongues.'

Americans, however, keep their eyes fixed on the rather ponderous English of some of the London daily papers, and of weeklies like the *Spectator* and the *Guardian* which sweat the prig at every pore; they know nothing of the racy speech of the English populace. I have always thought that the remarks heard in an English crowd are more witty than those of an American crowd. They are not so pleasant to hear, because they are bitter and often very cynical, whereas it is extremely rare to hear Americans of any class say anything wounding in a spirit of jocosity. But not seldom the American wit is of ready-made phrases, held in community, and you feel that the next man or woman who comes within earshot is likely to say pretty much the same thing; while the English man or girl, those of the large towns, constantly say striking things which have never been heard before and no one will repeat after them. The American caricaturist Briggs, deals with pretty much the same class of people that the great artist, Phil May, dealt with. With both the intention is not to make their people say smart things out of keeping with their characters, but what such people would naturally say. It is a matter of listening and picking up in streets, in tramways, on race courses, in drinking bars, and billiard rooms. Well, nobody who examines the work of these two artists over a given period can deny that the wit is on the side of Phil May's people. They are not always so funny, however. Of the hideous woman that both these artists present, the meagre American vixen, with sparse hair undisguised by art, may perhaps be laughed at, but

Phil May's bloated mother in bonnet and shawl, with all her features in dissolution, is almost tragic.

'Bid me to live and I will live thy protestant to be,' sang a poet not far off the Elizabethan time. 'So live that you can look any man square in the eye and tell him to go to hell,' says a modern American moralist. Between these two, one finds also, notwithstanding Professor Matthews, 'an abyss separating two cultures, two habits of mind,' as Mr. Mencken puts it. Certainly it is a prudent statement that no great popularity can be expected in the United States to-day by a writer who does not use American English, and by this I do not mean slang. Most of the modern American novelists, and even the poets, write it naturally. It is true that perhaps the best book of poems, and one of the best novels, published in America of late years, *Wolfsbane*, and *Wood and Stone*, by John Cowper Powys, are written in the English of England; but Mr. Powys, although he publishes in the United States, is, as I understand, an Englishman who has no desire to be either American or Americanized. Mr. Richard Le Gallienne is an Englishman who has been naturalized, and he does use American to a certain extent, but it is an obvious and uneasy graft on a prose formed by English origin, sympathies, and habits of thought. Mr. Le Gallienne looks rather like an exile in America. As for Mr. Christopher Morley, who is an American, his respect for the English literary tradition leads him to keep his English and American in separate compartments. When he slips, it is not upon the tolerable language of either country, but into the miserable jargon of the tawdry novel in both countries. 'Gilbert was on the qui vive,' he writes. What would Charles Lamb or Hazlitt say to that? American translators de-



liberately translate into American not English. In the translations of Strindberg's plays published in New York the translator says he found he could get nearer the original by American turns of speech.

This may seem contradicted by the fact that a large number of English books are read in the United States. They are read by the more cultivated classes who are willing to make a slight mental effort. Such people have the pleasant sensation of mastering a foreign language. They skip the phrases they don't understand, or try to translate them with a dictionary. 'The second turning revealed to Gerald the hoardings of a tube station with a constable's bull's-eye flashing on them' — such a phrase would be as unintelligible to the average inhabitants of an American city as a phrase of Spanish. But they accept it as an experience in an English book. If they find many like it in a book by an American, they and that author do not become friends. This is one of the reasons for the limited vogue of Henry James. As I said in an article published in the *Mercur de France* a few months ago, the influence of James has been in England, not in his native land. Then there is Mrs. Craigie, who had a broader culture, twice as much art, and fifty times more intellectual power than any other American woman who has written novels. Mrs. Craigie has no standing whatever in America.

No amount of analysis can precisely determine the causes of this indifference of Americans to two of our authors who do us the most credit. Resentment because they were absentees comes into it very little — perhaps not at all. Nor that they dealt with phrases of English life. Mrs. Gertrude Atherton's literary excursions into English society have not

hurt her with her large public. But Mrs. Atherton always gives the impression of some one standing outside and looking through the fence; you never forget that she is an American citizen. Henry James writes like an American lady who has been for long years married to an Englishman of good position, and Mrs. Craigie, as far as tone goes, writes like an Englishwoman. Tone, accent — perhaps the explanation is there. For just as the spoken English accent rouses a subconscious antagonism in America, so may the written English accent. Something too must be put down to the lack of interesting and able criticism to educate the public taste. The few men and women with broad culture, broad views, a thorough knowledge of two or three literatures, and a wide experience of life, will not waste their time in writing book reviews, especially under the conditions imposed by most of the papers. In the first place, it is not thought necessary to give much space to books; and then, what editors want is what they call a 'news-review' — that is, an article made up of quotations, a most unfair gutting of a book which leaves the reader with the impression that there is no need to buy it after all. The limited number of reviewers who express decided opinions, if confronted with work like Mrs. Craigie's, would assume a haughty or weary air, the object being to show they are no longer provincial, that they too have been to Gades, and that you can't put any junk across which will faize them. I have noticed the same instinct to disparage among English reviewers in face of an American book: I have not seen the *Times Literary Supplement* for some time, but it used to be insufferably patronizing and contemptuous when it dealt with American novels or poetry. Among daily and

weekly papers published in New York, the only respectable criticism appears in the Socialist paper, *The Call*; but the artistic views of the writers are dis-

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torted by their political convictions too often, as happens in Socialist papers all over the world where propaganda comes first.

## JOSEPH: A STORY

BY KATHERINE RICKFORD

THEY were sitting round the fire after dinner — not an ordinary fire, one of those fires that has a little room all to itself with seats at each side of it to hold a couple of people or three.

The big dining room was paneled with oak. At the far end was a handsome dresser that dated back for generations. One's imagination ran riot when one pictured the people who must have laid those pewter plates on the long, narrow, solid table. Massive mediæval chests stood against the walls. Arms and parts of armor hung against the paneling; but one noticed few of these things, for there was no light in the room save what the fire gave.

It was Christmas Eve. Games had been played. The old had vied with the young at snatching raisins from the burning snapdragon. The children had long since gone to bed; it was time their elders followed them, but they lingered round the fire, taking turns at telling stories. Nothing very weird had been told; no one had felt any wish to peep over his shoulder or try to penetrate the darkness of the far end of the room; the omission caused a sensation of something wanting. From each one there this thought went out, and so a sudden silence fell upon the party. It was a girl who broke it — a mere

child; she wore her hair up that night for the first time, and that seemed to give her the right to sit up so late.

'Mr. Grady is going to tell one,' she said.

All eyes were turned to a middle-aged man in a deep armchair placed straight in front of the fire. He was short, inclined to be fat, with a bald head and a pointed beard like the beards that sailors wear. It was plain that he was deeply conscious of the sudden turning of so much strained yet forceful thought upon himself. He was restless in his chair as people are in a room that is overheated. He blinked his eyes as he looked round the company. His lips twitched in a nervous manner. One side of him seemed to be endeavoring to restrain another side of him from a feverish desire to speak.

'It was this room that made me think of him,' he said thoughtfully.

There was a long silence, but it occurred to no one to prompt him. Everyone seemed to understand that he was going to speak, or rather that something inside him was going to speak, some force that craved expression and was using him as a medium.

The little old man's pink face grew strangely calm, the animation that