

## A POSSIBLE DIFFERENCE IN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN FICTION.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

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IN reading Mrs. Humphry Ward's last story, "Eleanor," I felt again, as I had felt before in her work, its general difference from the best American fiction in a particular which may perhaps have caught the notice of others. If it has not, I may be mistaken in my feeling, and shall be unable to persuade others to make it their conviction. But the point is interesting, and if I can make it evident, something will have been done toward explaining American novelists to themselves, and reconciling them to their performances as the necessary outcome of their conditions. Possibly, something more will have been done, and they will be satisfied in recognizing that English breadth must always be denied them, and making the most of the depth which seems to be their characteristic when they are at their best.

### I.

The deceitfulness of appearances is notorious, and even when they are the effect of reality they are seldom of such a unanimity that the inference from them cannot reasonably be questioned. You have first to get your appearances, and this alone is a thing of no small difficulty. Many appearances are so purely subjective that when you come to draw the attention of others to them, they turn out to be disappearances; and, in the case in hand, there will probably be some people to deny that English fiction is noticeably broad, or American fiction noticeably deep. They will say that Thomas Hardy and George Eliot have both written things that suggest depth as well as breadth, and that Mrs. Ward,

who is alone among English writers worthy to be mentioned with these novelists, is so much of the American spirit in her art that, if her work is broad, it is a proof that breadth is as characteristic of American fiction as depth.

The effect is to dissatisfy you with the words themselves, as saying too much, and if, after trying "dramatic" and "epical," you return to them, you wish to explain that you employ neither invidiously, but only with the single desire to trace certain questionable appearances to certain unquestionable facts, and so render them less questionable. I confess that the effect of the breadth I have felt, or seemed to feel, in Mrs. Ward's work was such as to make me discontented with the depth that I remembered in the best American work, as if this were comparatively a defect, since it was necessarily narrower. It was only by reflecting that our depth was the inevitable implication of our civic and social conditions that I was consoled, and restored to something like a national self-respect. To put it paradoxically, our life is too large for our art to be broad. In despair at the immense variety of the material offered it by American civilization, American fiction must specialize, and turning from the superabundance of character it must burrow far down in a soul or two.

Men may invent almost anything but themselves, and it was not because Hawthorne made himself psychological, but because he was so, that in the American environment he bent his vision inward. His theory was that our life was too level and too open and too sunnily prosperous for his art, but it was an instinct far subtler than this belief that he obeyed in seeking the subliminal drama. Hawthorne was romantic, but our realists who have followed him have been of the same instinct, and have dealt mainly with the subliminal drama, too. In their books, so faithful to the effect of our every-day life, the practical concerns of it are subordinated to the psychical, not consciously, but so constantly that their subordination has not been a matter of any question. The usual incidents of fiction have not, in the best American novelists, been the prime concern, but the subliminal effect of those incidents. Love itself, which is the meat and drink of fiction, is treated less as a passion than as a psychological phenomenon. Long ago the more artistic of our novelists perceived that the important matter was not what the lovers suffered or enjoyed in getting married, or whether they got mar-

ried at all or not, but what sort of man and maid their love found them out to be, and how, under its influence, the mutual chemistry of their natures interacted. All the problems, in any case, are incomparably simplified for the English novelist by the definite English conditions. One can no longer call them fixed; but they are still definite, and in a certain way character proceeds from them—the character of a gentleman, a business man, an artizan, a servant, a laborer. Each of these has his being in a way so different from the others, that he is a definitely different creature; and when through some chance, some perverse mixture of the elements, the conditions are traversed, and the character bred of one shows itself in another, it has a stronger relief from the alien background. But, ordinarily, the Englishman feels, thinks, and acts from his class; when you name his class you measurably state him; and you have rather to do with what he does than with what he is. The result in fiction is a multiplicity of incidents and persons; you have breadth rather than depth.

Even in so psychological a story as Mrs. Ward's "Marcella" the definite conditions account for so much that it is, after all, a study of incident more than a study of motive. The conventions of English realism, the county society and the life of the great houses, and interests and opinions of the gentry and their dependents; the hovels and the physical and moral squalor of the poor; the parliamentary election, and the agitations of the demagogues and the real reformers; the intervention of the church and the chapel; the poaching and the murder and the hanging; all these things are of the familiar acquaintance of the novel-reader, who knows them from the time of Bulwer down, through the innumerable novelists who have treated of them since. Mrs. Ward treats of them with a fresh mind, but they are in themselves so far from fresh that they seem to stale her thought of them; and the figure that she projects against them, the very novel and very original figure of Marcella, seems to acquire convention from them, and to be as hackneyed as all the rest. The result is a fiction of high order, of higher order in certain aspects than any since George Eliot's fictions, and yet having breadth rather than depth. Yet this may be an appearance and not a fact. Marcella is so essentially modern, so perfectly of the day before yesterday, that the inquiry into the soul of the socialistic esthete, the girl of good birth and good tradition, emerg-

ing from her shady father's past, to find herself engaged to the most conscientious and noble-minded of aristocrats, but at war with all his convictions through the impassioned preferences of her earlier associations, necessarily involves psychological research which goes far if it does not go deep. She is, indeed, so interesting that one wishes the author might have had her in the sparsely settled region of an American fiction, so that we could have sat down with her in the long leisure of our social existence and divined her to the ultimate mystery of her nature. It may be that there is really no more of her than her author shows, but it seems as if, in a different environment, there might be more.

Possibly, we touch here a fundamental variance of the English and American life. In former times we Americans were accused of being curious, over-curious, of being insatiable and impertinent questioners of strangers. It may be, however, that we were not so, but that the most penetrating difference between us and the English is that they are social and we are personal. Their talk is of incidents; ours of interests. Their denser life, we will say, satisfies them with superficial contrasts, while in our thinner and more homogeneous society the contrasts that satisfy are subliminal. This theory would account for their breadth and our depth without mortifying the self-love of either, which I should like to spare in our case if not in theirs.

Our personality is the consequence of our historic sparsity, and it survives beyond its time because the nature of our contiguity is still such as to fix a man's mind strongly upon himself, and to render him restless till he has ascertained how far all other men are like him. We are prodigiously homogeneous, though in the absence of classification we seem so chaotic. We shall change, probably, and then the character of our fiction, our art of representing life, will change, too. Very likely, it will become more superficial and less subliminal; it will lose in depth as it gains in breadth. As yet, its attempts to be broad, to be society fiction, have resulted in a shallowness which is not suggestive of breadth.

## II.

The English are less apt than we have been to carry a story abroad, and to find in an alien setting terms more favorable than those of home for the subliminal interests. This may be because they inevitably carry their civilization with them in all possible

details down to the emblematic bath-tub, while we find that we can get on abroad fairly well without steam heat and exposed plumbing, and the American order which they stand for. We are, in fact, far more easily detachable from our native background, and blend far more readily with the alien atmosphere, than the English, so that I think if an American family as nearly as possible corresponding to the Manisties had been set down in the air of Rome, they would have lost their native outline more. The thing is hard to say, and perhaps I shall come as near to suggesting it as may be in noting the impression that the cosmopolitan Englishman gives, of being more English than if he had never left home; whereas, the cosmopolitan American really ceases to be American even if he does not become anything else.

Of course, my position can be assailed by saying that there could not be any such American family as the Manisties, who are distinctively and inalienably English, and are of that world which, whether it is really great or not, makes ours seem a small world. Manisty has had to do all his life with questions which affect politically, socially, and spiritually the civilization of many races, systems, languages, and religions, as no American public man can have to do with them; and Eleanor Burgoyne, through the English traditions which admit women to the discussion of such questions, is of a range of thinking and feeling possible to no American woman, except some one who has given up society and gone in for a public life through the advocacy of a great interest, like temperance or the suffrage for women. I allow that all this is true, without allowing all its implications; and in the meantime I fall back to my original position, and invite the reader again to consider whether the fact does not make for that breadth in English fiction which I began by imagining. We will suppose that the author, for the sake of getting her main group of people face to face with each other, and keeping them to their psychological problem, wishes to isolate them from the alliances and relations of their past, and therefore takes them into an alien environment. Almost immediately it proves that she has not isolated the English Manisty and Eleanor, but only the American girl, Lucy Foster. With the others, questions of European policy at once come in, and distract their attention from the psychological problem; to Lucy alone these questions are without vital interest, if not without reality. Priests, diplomats, peasants,

artists, citizens, society figures come and go in her consciousness, with the effect of deepening it inward in the great question whether she is doing wrong in letting Manisty love her, or letting herself love him, when she feels or knows that Eleanor loves him.

If the situation had been invented by an American novelist, I think he would have studied it mainly through the consciousness of Lucy, and the prime interest of the story would have been personal, psychological, subliminal. The effect would have been depth; and I do not mean this in any bragging way. Now, the main effect is breadth, which, certainly, I could not mean derogatorily. It is indifferent to me, for the present inquiry, whether the American or the English effect is better; and I wish to note, without disparagement of Mrs. Ward's work, that Mr. Hardy gets depth by dealing with persons who are unconventionally circumstanced, or wholly out of society. For much the same reason, the author of the remarkable "Mark Rutherford" books is able to get it.

Is it true, then, that the Americans get it because their characters are unconventionally circumstanced, or are not in society? Something very like this might be true; and American fiction is faithfuller to the average American conditions than if it dealt with people conventionally circumstanced and in society, for most of us are certainly not so, as most equally educated Englishmen certainly are so. We have the forms; the social structure is the same with us; but having built our house and furnished it, we find it a bother, and would rather live at a hotel.

Still better, we like to travel, to journey and sojourn in far countries, and amidst the outer strangeness to get more intimately at our inner selves. If we are novelists, we like to take our characters abroad, as if the home sparsity were not enough, and in the resulting isolation, to penetrate the last recesses of their mystery, or at least learn that it is not penetrable. More than one piece of our subtlety in this sort could be alleged, but perhaps it is sufficient to allege two, of which what I am saying seems eminently true, namely, "The Marble Faun," and "Daisy Miller." If an English novelist does the same thing, the result is not the same; the English environment is inalienable; the characters are continually frittering themselves away in superficial encounter on the native terms, at dinners, and luncheons, and teas, till there is nothing subliminal left in them.

## III.

One great objection to words is, that they are always over-saying things; and I could easily take up the foregoing postulate and show it untenably excessive. Nevertheless, I think it has some truth in it, and I feel concerning Eleanor Burgoyne, that she is not enough alone for the evolution of her innermost self. She is always in a clutter of society, which is right enough, since she is of that English world so cluttered, to our elbow-roomy American sense, as we view it afar or anear; even in her withdrawals from it in pain or in passion, the atmosphere of drawing-rooms seems to envelop her. It is her native air, and one cannot complain, though one feels that a final knowledge of what she might otherwise have been to the reader must be postponed to a future life. What she could be in this, hampered by the perpetual coming and going, and meeting and parting, is a most generously imagined personality. In fact, Mrs. Ward is so good at imagining heroines of noble nature that she ought to be the favorite novelist of her sex, which loves to have its magnanimity recognized; I will not say flattered. The wife of David Grieve, in the novel of his name, is one of these great creatures, and worthily the heroine of what I am not going rashly to call the author's best book, though I should not dispute such a verdict from another. I think it was contrived that the reader should meet her on a more subliminal level than most other English heroines, and this was perhaps so because she was of a social world almost as uncrowded as our own; and perhaps also because there is something much more analogous to the American in the Scotch nature than in the English. I am writing without the book, but after the five years which have passed since I read that powerful story, she is still present in a sort of tender sublimity, as the fit type of the sacred love whose flame purifies David Grieve's soul of all but the record of his profaner passion.

So much may be expected and exacted of the type of heroine which Mrs. Ward imagines, that the noble goodness of Marcella Maxwell, when she reappears in the story of "Sir George Tressady," can have force not only to regenerate the feeling of Sir George toward herself and transform it to an exalted friendship, but also to turn the jealousy of Lady Tressady to some such complexion. Can such things be? one asks one's self, and then is ashamed of one's self for asking, for doubting. Yet, Lady Tres-



sady, in her prettiness and pettiness, her vanity and vulgarity, has the superior probability, and is—I am tempted to say it—more profoundly divined than Marcella. In fact, Marcella loses probability in her second avatar, as socialistic wife to a socializing prime minister. In the scheme of “Sir George Tressady,” the ideal beauty of soul so courageously imagined for her scarcely recompenses the reader for this loss, though he must honor the courage. Her apparition to Tressady, crushed and dying in the coal mine, is not of the convincing supernaturalism to which Tourguénieff and Tolstoy have sometimes carried their naturalism; and her personal beauty, which is so constantly insisted upon, seems at each insistence less impressive. At the risk of being insufferably paradoxical, I should say that Marcella was left less appreciable by being left too little a mystery, and that, in being altogether removed from the vague, she is rendered impalpable to those perceptions which realize personalities. To put it still more perversely, we meet her too often to know her thoroughly. We know little, light, hard Letty Tressady far better; we have a sense of her; she is the more convincing because, to the very last, we are no more convinced than she is that she is not still jealous of her husband with respect to Marcella, though she is no longer jealous of Marcella with respect to her husband. She has forgiven but she has not forgotten, and she remains with the reader in the luminous question whether she will like being commended to the care of Marcella and Lord Maxwell by her dying husband.

In suggesting such a question, the author evinces psychological depth, and in questions equally incapable of final answer in the case of both the wife and the mistress in “David Grieve,” I find proof of a depth in that novel beyond that of any other of Mrs. Ward’s books. The wife’s relation to David’s past amour remains full of satisfying mystery; and the feeling of the French girl who forsakes him for her art, and escapes in terror from her love of him, is something that seems to penetrate the very sources of her nature.

#### IV.

Of course, I am aware of proving too much, but if I am getting at the truth, I do not much mind being inconsistent, or even finding myself wrong. If my thesis is that Mrs. Ward, when her fiction deals with the more crowded scenes of English life,



loses depth, and when it deals with a sparser environment gains depth, perhaps I shall not find myself so very wrong, after all. I should still have to ask myself how far she had sought such an environment in laying the scene of her last novel in Italy, and in giving her English heroine the relief of an alien setting; how far such a motive was subconscious with her, and how far she had failed to give it effect.

I have already intimated my sense of her comparative failure, and as for the subconscious motive, that is something that I know of no critical subtlety competent to render evident. The question which remains is, in what degree the inevitable spread of the story has superficialized the heroine's character, or perhaps the impression of her character.

What one has to do, in any case, is to recognize the courageous originality with which Eleanor Burgoyne is imagined. She has been married to a sufficiently unlovable and unloving husband, whose delirious suicide has involved the death of their little son. She struggles up from her crushing sorrow, and in making herself useful to her cousin Manisty as his secretary and counsellor in his work, she finds not respite from her grief so much as the chance of new happiness in the hope of his love. But she loves him too well and unwisely to be his unsparing critic; and when the unformed American girl, Lucy Foster, comes into their family circle, and from the fearlessness of her absolute sincerity censures where Eleanor has not the heart to censure, Eleanor has the anguish of seeing the man's fancy veer toward the girl as one of greater authority. Lucy is beautiful, and Eleanor, in the first days, has devoted her taste and knowledge to making her more evidently beautiful. The feeling that she has toward her is not jealousy, or else it is a jealousy so sublimed by her noble nature that it is rather a recognition of the facts than a resentment of them. She weakens, indeed, so far as to put the case to Lucy and ask her to give Manisty up to the love which has earned him, but not won him; and the girl consents. But both their wills are crushed in Manisty's, when he makes it plain that his love has *nothing to do with justice*, and that he wants what he wants, not because it is best or impersonally right, but because he wants it. This is the way of true love, which we are always exalting as the finest thing in the world, though there are obviously many things finer. It is, at least, honest and sin-

cere, and that is what Eleanor Burgoyne owns in her acquiescence with fate, when she renders Lucy up to her inevitable happiness, if it is happiness to marry Manisty. That the woman should ask the girl to forego her happiness is a daring supposition in which we must acknowledge the author's high esthetic courage, and perhaps the frankness which is almost brutal in Eleanor's despair is truer than any fineness would have been. The contrast of the two lives in that scene, the woman's experience and the girl's innocence, is more valuable than the contrast even of their natures; but possibly in this also the author's work lends itself to my theory of greater breadth and less depth in the English novel as compared with the American. Nothing of subconscious, of subliminal, is left to the reader's conjecture; but I do not at all mean that character is rendered superficial by bringing everything in it to the surface. I am far too fond of the plain light of day for that; but still, it may be so contrived that the plain light of day may strike to the nethermost abysses, and that what is most intricate and most recondite in the soul may be rendered luminously apparent at its proper depth.

V.

The personality and the dramatic office of Eleanor are greatly imagined, and they remain essentially unaffected by the handling. You get the meaning of her tragedy and the innermost meaning, which is perhaps less poignant than it might be if it were relieved by comedy. Mrs. Ward is serious, and, no doubt, in this she has her strongest hold upon her vast public. Through the absence of humor, Mrs. Ward is a little lower, if one chooses to think so, than that great woman novelist whose level she more nearly reaches than any of her successors. You cannot quite name her in the same breath with George Eliot; but you can name her in the next breath; and it is to be questioned if even George Eliot had a wider and stronger grasp of the important actualities of English life. In "Eleanor" one must acknowledge that increasing mastery of which each of her successive books has given proofs. She has risen to her present eminence so wholly since American fiction began to shape itself from the art of Continental fiction, that one might almost claim an American influence in her work; but that might well be claiming too much. Her manner is still marked by the ejaculatory and suspiratory self-indul-

gence of the minor English novelists, to which George Eliot herself was not superior. She draws her breath in open pathos, and she caresses a situation or a character with a pitying epithet or adjective, as George Eliot does in the case of some heroine she likes very much, notably Maggie Tulliver, or Janet Dempster, and less notably Dorothea Brooke. The foible is characteristic of all but the finest artists in English fiction, and in her greater moments Mrs. Ward does not indulge it. There is nothing of this weak pity of her own creations in such a scene as that where Eleanor reverses her prayer to Lucy Foster, and, baring her wasted neck to show herself a dying woman, makes the girl promise to be true to the love between her and Manisty. The most touching moment of the whole story, that when she asks Manisty to carry her up the stairs, is of an intense pathos, enfeebled by no suggestion of feeling in the author. "Eleanor, with her hand on Marie's arm, tottered across the court-yard. At the convent door her strength failed her. She turned to Manisty: 'I can't walk up those stairs. Do you think you could carry me? I am very light.' Struck with sudden emotion, he threw his arms round her. She yielded like a tired child. He, who had instinctively prepared himself for a certain weight, was aghast at the ease with which he lifted her. Her head, in its pretty black hat, fell against his breast. Her eyes closed. He wondered if she had fainted. He carried her to her own room and laid her on the sofa there. . . . As he left the room Eleanor settled down happily on her pillow. 'The first and only time!' she thought. 'My heart on his—my arms round his neck. There must be impressions that outlast all others. I shall manage to put them all away at the end—but that!'"

Such a passage (and it is by no means the only passage of its kind in the book) is of a fineness so penetrating, so far-reaching, that a critic more enamored of his thesis than I, might own it a proof of the contrary. If he had been arguing that English fiction had breadth but wanted depth, he might urge that it was one of the exceptions which proved the rule. But I prefer to save myself by a little different means, and referring to a suggestion already made somewhat faint-heartedly, I would leave the reader to say whether, in such an instance, Mrs. Ward was not rather like the American than the English novelists.

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