

James Gray's Novel of a Woman's Education

WINGS OF GREAT DESIRE. By James Gray. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

THIS thoughtful and carefully executed novel may be thought of as moving away from "Madame Bovary." That is to say, Emma Bovary was pictured as a woman at once strengthened and betrayed by romantic sensualism, and her sisters have been legion in recent American fiction. Faith Winchester, the heroine of "Wings of Great Desire" is, on the contrary, strengthened and betrayed by her romantic moralism. Born to a mother who combines sentimental unreality with petty selfishness, and enduring two sisters who are subject to Bovaryism, to the ruin of their own happiness, Faith reacts violently against the small deceptions, the romantic hypocrisy, and the petty sentimentalism of the female portion of her family. The death of her father early removes the chief prop of her childhood, so that thereafter she is left isolated to make her own career. That career is traced in the novel through the death of her husband, the death of her son, and the marriage of her other children.

The book has, then, as a theme the education by life of one of those middle-class women whom we vaguely call puritans. She is herself compelled to make compromises; she, too, is tempted to bring up her children as her mother had done; but unlike the elder generation she struggles against taking this easy and harmful way. She develops tolerance and sympathy without, however, ever yielding her own inward integrity to the force of circumstance; yet at the end, through the kindly deceit of her son and daughter, she is left protected in the illusion that the depression still wants her services as a writer.

The novel is, however, more than a fictional biography. In cutting a swath through the decades from the March day when Joel Winchester, back in 1872, prayed to be made worthy of the new child, to the winter morning in 1935 when the reader last sees Faith, happy and important in the illusory world which her

children have arranged for her, Mr. Gray has tried to catch the flavor of successive epochs of Middle Western society. The novel might have been planned on either scenic or panoramic lines, to use Percy Lubbock's distinction. Mr. Gray has chosen the scenic method in order to throw all possible lights on his heroine. His analysis is careful and sound; and yet I feel that there is more liveliness in the secondary characters than there is in Faith herself.

Mr. Gray is a novelist of talent who has brought everything to the execution of "Wings of Great Desire" except genius. Some of the scenes are executed with

great dash and vigor; others lack vividness. By giving a date at the head of each chapter he has tried to call attention to the flow of time in his fiction, but he has avoided the advanced methods of Dos Passos and others in conjuring up the background of society in given years. With some exceptions the settings of the various scenes remain indefinite — a weakness in a book which demands constant attention

to the interplay of character and setting. This weakness is compensated by the faithfulness of the author to the minutiae of speech and action.

In addition to the sincerity and faithfulness of the tale, I find "Wings of Great Desire" interesting as a portent. It may be that we are coming out of the epoch when cruelty, sadism, and violence served as the stock in trade of the realistic novel. Mr. Gray has shown that a human being may be made interesting without recourse to melodrama, without being an underdog, and without resorting to illegality. If the attention of fiction has been too constantly directed to a particular stratum of society, his latest book seems to show an interest in widening the scope of the novel, and bringing it back to his traditional function of taking in the whole scope of society.

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James Gray

Life Is an Insult

DEATH ON THE INSTALLMENT PLAN.

By Louis-Ferdinand Céline. New York: Little, Brown & Co. 1938. \$2.75.

CONSIDERING the extravagant violence of Céline's writing, we may take this title to be his most temperate definition of life. It is certainly a good definition of his books, for the two we have are installments in one furious affirmation of death. Four years ago he produced "Journey to the End of the Night," which began with its hero, Ferdinand, going to war in 1914. Now we are given Ferdinand's early years as a brat in the Paris slums, apprentice in a jewelry shop, student in an English school, through a series of capering, picaresque adventures that carry him into manhood. About him we see his parents, his pals, and a host of characters that stream through the pages, creatures of an amazing literary fecundity. But they are all of them dead, and Ferdinand above all. He is a fantastic shell of a human, a body without a spirit.

Cruel, insensitive, mad, with no control of either his thoughts or his functions, he can simulate life by moving with wild abandon, but the real spring in him that makes him move is the credo of his creator. Ferdinand is Céline's animated argument: Life is a ghastly insult, and living is an endless retching. This must read like an exaggeration, but every page of Ferdinand's adventures bears it out. The publishers would have us believe that the history of Ferdinand is something of an autobiography, but that can hardly be so. This Ferdinand, who is quite mad when he is not in some way befouling himself, would never write a book. He would drink the ink, spew it upon the publisher, and burn down the office.

Céline has already been compared with Rabelais, Swift, and Joyce, with little justice. Rabelais is full of lusty laughter; this book has no honest, living lust in it, and only a desperate snickering for laughter. Swift was a righteous moralist; he condemned what he hated because of the ideas he loved. Céline loves nothing except to say that everything is a rotten joke. Joyce's "Ulysses" is a model of shape and form, and Leopold Bloom a model of sanity. Céline's books

have only the shape of a disordered dream. This may be his vision of life, but it is strange that he devotes to it a great deal of creative energy, a life force. That is the paradox he leaves with us, the spectacle of a fertile talent dedicated to the expression of negation.



Louis-Ferdinand Céline

“Joseph in Egypt”

A Heterodox View of Mann's Novel

BY EDITH HAMILTON



Joseph and Potiphar's wife—from a painting by Decortone

ROMANTIC archeology is, of course, nothing new. It has been with us for many years. Our grandparents, as well as our parents and ourselves, were brought up on “Ivanhoe” and “Quentin Durward.” But into this old method Thomas Mann has introduced a new fashion. He claims, and his admirers claim for him, that he has written “Joseph in Egypt” not as a twentieth century man trying to interpret Egypt of the eighteenth century B.C. in terms of his own and his readers’ twentieth century pattern of thought, but as one who has been enabled by his profound learning and sympathetic understanding to make that faraway past become his own present, so that he has lived with the men who peopled it, looked at it with their eyes, understood the way they talked and thought.

This is new. Scott, and Cooper and the other Victorians who went back to the past for their settings, had no such idea. Indeed, if it had ever occurred to them, they would have rejected it. Scott’s notion of the way to write novels about the past made him stay in his own nineteenth century pattern of thought with entire content. His object was to bring history to life, and to do that it had to be brought close to his readers. Anything incomprehensible in his characters would have made them remote and lessened their reality. Ivanhoe’s exterior, in pilgrim’s dress or knightly coat of mail, was romantically strange, but his interior was that of the model young Victorian gentleman. He presented no puzzles. All that he said and thought was immediately comprehensible.

The modern archeological romancers have gone along the same lines. Scott’s way is still the popular way. Kristin Lavransdatter and Anthony Adverse and Scarlett O’Hara are delightfully different from us on the outside, but on the inside there is nothing alien. We are on familiar terms with Scarlett. We have all met her like. Miss Mitchell follows the accepted formula. Because we understood Scarlett so well, the time she lived in

comes to life. She bridges the distance between us and the Civil War.

But with “Joseph in Egypt” Thomas Mann has done something different. In this book the part romance and archeology play do not follow the usual lines. The personages of the story are outside our experience; they think differently from us; their words sound strangely in our ears. The writer’s remarkable powers of description are devoted to making the setting of his story come in vivid actuality before the reader; but in that setting, which he is at such pains to paint in realistic detail, he places people so strange and remote, they are like shadows dimly seen through the mist of the ages. Their surroundings seem real; they themselves do not. It is a complete reversal of the usual method. Scott and the others did their scenery with care and as accurately as they could, but the interest of their stories was plot and character drawing, as it has been since stories began. In “Joseph in Egypt” plot and action are unimportant to the point of being almost non-existent, and the real protagonist, the only entity that comes to life, is not Joseph nor any other character, but ancient Egypt, its visible exterior, as Thomas Mann has conceived it.

The descriptions take up more than half of the book. There are pages and pages of them, thirty, forty, unbroken, running on very slowly, weighted with a mass of meticulous detail, the exact size and shape, the particular colors and decorations, of this and that city or temple or house; the varied crowds in the streets, their clothes, the food they bargain for and eat as they saunter by, their manners, their jokes, the cries of the vendors, the great equipages, the priestly processions, the little bands of musicians and acting folk. The cumulative effect is great: one receives an impression of actual places and people seen by a most careful observer who also has notably the artist’s eye.

It is this sense of actuality which holds the reader’s attention. Without it not all

Thomas Mann’s gift for describing would make us persist through those many pages. We would not put up with a novel about today which ran to even half as many, no matter how skillfully it was written. What leads us on in “Joseph in Egypt” is our persuasion, our delighted wonder, that we are being shown by a man of great learning what that fabled land, Egypt of the Pyramids and the Pharaohs, was like. Essential to the success of “Joseph in Egypt” is the belief that it is a trustworthy guidebook.

Only an Egyptologist could criticize the author on this point. But it is legitimate for the rest of us who have read so many romantic reconstructions of Greece and Rome, where imagination easily supplied the gaps in knowledge, to beg Thomas Mann in the next edition to give us his authorities. A note for each detail would not be too much. Quite the contrary. It would be of deep interest to know how it was discovered that the city of Per-Sopd smelled so strongly of carnations as to affect visitors with pain; in what guide for Egyptian architects is found a list of the woods used in building a great house like Potiphar’s; where are the sources for the account of On, city of gold, ancient when Thebes was building; who brought to light, and how, the odd and charming table manners practised by Pharaoh’s nobles. Questions such as these are suggested by nearly every page. Let us have a scholar’s edition of “Joseph in Egypt.” For the first time since books began it would outrank in general interest the popular edition.

The account of the black magic Potiphar’s wife makes use of to draw Joseph to her, shows, perhaps more clearly than any other passage, how fundamental to the success of the book is its authenticity. Those rites to “the gracious mistress bitch” which take place at dead of blackest night upon the house-top, are extremely interesting when considered as a veracious portrayal of ancient witchcraft, but from any other point of view they would be tiresome and silly almost past