

Ambidextrous Novel

THE LEFT HAND IS THE DREAMER. By Nancy Wilson Ross. New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc. 1947. 390 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by JOHN WOODBURN

AUNT PALM, a delicate-boned, falcon-hearted, detached, and iconoclastic old lady with whom I have recently fallen in love, once remarked to her daughter-in-law, the protagonist of this novel, that Da Vinci must have painted his enigmatic St. John with his left hand. "The right hand is the doer, the left hand the dreamer. The St. John was painted out of something Leonardo knew, but dared not say too openly." When Fredericka asked what things dare not be said, Aunt Palm replied, with crystalline bitterness: "Almost nothing real, lasting, strange, or true dare be uttered in all one's life."

Whatever her natural dexterousness, Nancy Wilson Ross clearly wrote this book with both hands. Like the St. John, it was created out of something she knew, but, unlike the evasive Leonardo, has dared to say openly. The bones of this book are old and worn, rubbed smooth by the hands, generally the left, of writers for the most part too lazy, timid, or ignorant to explore the theme beyond its romantic or erotic boundaries. The essential, progenitive theme of "The Left Hand Is the Dreamer" cast a spell over our childhood as the story of *The Sleeping Beauty*. Translated into a more recognizable world, it becomes the angular pattern of the wistful woman, drowsing in the emotional

indolence of a conventional marriage, who is roused from her hibernation by the kiss of Prince Charming.

I have been deliberately cavalier in my attitude toward the basic plot of this novel because it has been so frequently degraded by writers of the aspirin school, and because I am so impressed by what Nancy Ross has done to vitalize this polished skeleton, to give it dignity and significance, along with the firm, fine flesh of her prose.

It is composed and sensitive, at times opalescent, and despite its poise and assurance, manages to carry a disturbing undercurrent of urgency and warning as the sound of men marching in the street might enter, faintly, a room where music was played.

Except for the excrescent detail of her life, Fredericka will be no stranger to many of you. She is the woman you notice suddenly staring off into space at the cocktail party in the house in the country; the attractive, well-bred, well-groomed woman who knows what to say when she meets you, but isn't quite sure why she is saying it—the woman Nancy Ross has called Fredericka Perry.

Because of her mother's plaintive illness, Fredericka had gone as a child to live with her wonderful Aunt Palm. Aunt Palm's clear, hard eye, the eye of an esthetic hawk, swept over all creation, translating it into terms of beauty and truth, and Fredericka grew to watch Aunt Palm, for signals to live by. When she went to the nearby up-state college at Attica Center, Fredericka met a stormy

young medical student who loved her and scared her nearly out of her wits. The strong wind of his wooing tossed her into the vacuum of marriage with her cousin Christopher, Aunt Palm's commonplace son. The recent war found Fredericka in her early thirties, bored and secure, with two handsome adolescent children toward whom she had long ceased to feel umbilical, and a husband she accepted as she accepted the weather. When her husband joined up with a not-too-perilous branch of the service, Aunt Palm said to Fredericka: "Christopher wants to escape. . . . He's bored. The war means nothing to him, but escape does." Then Aunt Palm, in one of her piercing, seeming irrelevancies, said calmly: "The truth is, the old nag is dead. . . . Trot, trot to Boston to buy a loaf of bread. . . ." Restless and disoriented, she decided to go back to the college at Attica Center and work at her neglected painting, perhaps dust off her mind with a course in World History. It was in the history class that she first saw Franz Allers. He stood on the platform, facing his indifferent class, a worn, ravaged man, deep in *Weltschmerz*, far from and still agonizingly close to the Vienna where his wife had been murdered by the Gestapo. Franz Allers had seen a world die around him and had wanted bitterly to die with it. The climate of chaos was still around him, and, standing quietly before his innocent, ignorant audience, he strove for the limitless perspective of truth; as much to sustain his spiritual convalescence as to bring some light into the room. Through Franz Allers, Fredericka began to come alive, to deepen her shallows, and to enter upon her ordeal.

I have left many things for you to find for yourself in this novel. Aunt Palm has my heart, as I have told you. She is aged brandy, filling the book with her *bouquet*, and I could not forbear giving you a taste. The other characterizations, with one disturbing exception, are excellent and sure, boldly painted with the author's right hand. Uncle Philander, an engaging eccentric, a man of magnificent pettinesses and quiet integrities, is, I suppose, pure *lagniappe*, but I see no reason why that amiable New Orleans custom should not be applied to books. It is Franz Allers who disturbs me. Because he is both character and symbol, catalyst, Cassandra, thought against thoughtlessness, lover, and man, he has been given almost too much courage and wisdom for one man to carry. But there is so much here that is real, lasting, and true that, to paraphrase Aunt Palm, the perfection of Franz Allers may be taken as the one strange thing.



THE AUTHOR: Nancy Wilson Ross is a native of Olympia, Washington, who has traveled far, thought much, and written well. She came to New York at twenty and left it for Germany, where she studied at the Bauhaus, the school of modern art which Hitler closed for being "dangerously international." Back in America she wrote magazine articles about the rising menace of National Socialism and found her countrywomen as apathetic and as insulated as were most of her countrymen. She went to Mexico and the Orient, then four times crossed the United States in a

trailer. From these interstate treks two non-fiction books resulted. "Farthest Reach, Oregon and Washington" (1942), and "Westward the Women" (1944). There resulted also a conviction that geographical conquest is only a symbol of the pioneering which America must do on the continent of the mind, where as yet only a few shore settlements have been made. In her fiction Miss Ross is striking into the forest. There is a previous novel, "Take the Lightning" (1940), and another is in progress. During the war Miss Ross did the Navy's official book on "The Waves." She is married to Stanley Young, the playwright, and lives at Old Westbury, Long Island. There she has her collection of art from China and Japan, her favorite contemporary painting and sculpture. There she writes, cooks, and thinks.

The Bittersweet of Genius

THE LETTERS AND PRIVATE PAPERS OF WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY, VOL. III & IV. Collected and edited by Gordon N. Ray. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1946. Vol. III 684 pp. Vol. IV 459 pp. \$12.50.

THE SHOWMAN OF VANITY FAIR. By Lionel Stevenson. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1947. 393 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by GORDON S. HAIGHT

THACKERAY'S injunction to his daughter against any biography has been attributed to reticence about his insane wife, fear of scandal over his relations with the Brookfields, and various other causes. With the publication of Gordon N. Ray's "The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray," of which volumes III and IV have just appeared, a more plausible reason may be advanced. His life was already written in his novels; there in half a dozen heroes he had drawn himself, his follies and griefs, his kindness and generosity, his implacable hatreds. His mother, his stepfather, his invalid wife, his horrible mother-in-law had been studied in detail. Naturally he shrank from the inevitable comparisons that would be made.

His letters written from America while lecturing on the English Humorists echo the constant refrain of how difficult it is for literary men to keep their honesty. "We are all actors more or less," he wrote. His discontent was perhaps increased by the realization that he was as cold-blooded a mountebank as Laurence Sterne, whose hypocrisy he castigated so profitably and so unfairly:

A perilous trade, indeed, is that of a man who has to bring his tears and laughter, his recollections, his personal griefs and joys, his private thoughts and feelings to market, to write them on paper, and sell them for money. Does he exaggerate his grief so as to get his reader's pity for a false sensibility—feign indignation so as to establish a character for virtue? . . . appeal to the gallery gods with claptraps and vulgar baits to catch applause? Where did the lie begin, and did he know where? and where did the truth end in the art and scheme of this man of genius, this actor, this quack?

In Thackeray's case the answers to such questions can be found in Mr. Ray's superb edition of the "Letters," which read like a new novel added to the works. All the humor, the tender sentiment quenched in cynicism, the sympathy and the invincible snobbery, the easy generosity and preoc-

cupation with money—all the contradictory phases of Thackeray's complex character are poured out in the unpremeditated style that is his greatest gift. For many readers the truth will be more interesting than the fiction.

In the new volumes his observations provide a lively sidelight on America a century ago. Boston, New York, and Philadelphia pleasantly surprised him: "I didn't expect to find half so many agreeable people, or well-bred ladies and gentlemen as I have found. It is naturalness which is the great charm after all: and that best of good-breeding is as plenty here as with us." Everywhere he was overwhelmed with hospitality, until he said that it was not the lecturing that was hard, it was the eating. Though prepared for the shock by Dickens and Mrs. Trollope, he shuddered at the crudity of American manners: "O you knife swallowers — O you bl-w-rs-of n-s-s-in f-ng-rs!" The comments on slavery are prescient. Looking beyond the shallow sentimentalism of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which he steadfastly declined to read, he rightly saw that the basis of racial antagonism was economic. As long as it was profitable, the slaves would be, on the whole, well treated; but

when white labor begins to undersell them at cotton & sugar work, then the "beautiful relation betwixt owner & servant" will pretty soon come to an end. O it will be a terrible day when 5 or 6 millions of these blacks will have to perish and give place to the white man wanting work. But there's a long day for that yet; the West has to be filled ere the white man's hand turns against the black man,—after your time & mine, after England's



—The Bettmann Archive.

Thackeray's letters "echo the constant refrain of how difficult it is for literary men to keep their honesty."

perhaps, in ½ a dozen generations when this the Great Empire of the world numbers 120 millions of citizens (and esser), at least when our old Europe is worn out, who knows whether the Great Republic may not colonize with its Negroes the vacant British Isles?

Part of Thackeray's desire to come to America can be traced to misery over the collapse of his friendship with Mrs. Brookfield, which had deprived his life for a second time of its emotional focus. In the effort to forget he deliberately cultivated a sentimental affection for Sally Baxter, a beautiful girl whom he met in New York. The young lady may well have been perplexed when Thackeray, more than twice her age, wrote that he had put two letters in the fire yesterday, "two very long fond sentimental letters. . . . My heart was longing and yearning after you full of love and gratitude for your welcome of me—but the words grew a little too warm." He hints that he would gladly return from Boston for Christmas with the Baxter family. "Say, 'if you approve and honor the proposal!'" he adds, quoting from his lecture Sterne's proposal to marry Eliza after his wife should die. "Approve and honor the proposal!" the lecture continues. "The coward was writing gay letters to his friends this while, with sneering allusions to this poor foolish *Bramine*." But Thackeray too had written his mother just the day before his letters to Sally seemed too warm:

I have been actually in love for 3 days with a pretty wild girl of 19 (and was never more delighted in my life than by discovering that I could have this malady over again) and am sure that my own peace of mind is immensely increased by leaving Europe. When I began to write Esmond how miserable I was! I can contemplate that grief now and put it into a book; and the end of my flirtation with Miss Sally Baxter here is that I have got a new character for a novel—though to be sure she is astoundingly like Beatrix.

From her he drew Ethel Newcome, but the calculating method of studying her makes the denunciations of Sterne sound rather hollow.

No further examples are needed to indicate the immense debt all future biographers will owe to Mr. Ray's work. With scrupulous accuracy he combines a distinguished style and a delightful sense of humor that often make the notes as interesting as the letters themselves. These four magnificently printed volumes have already assumed their place as a landmark of Victorian scholarship. They augur well for the biography of Thackeray that Mr. Ray plans.

Meanwhile, of course, others will try their hands. Mr. Lionel Steven-