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A Letter from England

By EDWIN MUIR

THE English novel has been showing more and more diversity in the last two or three years. There are no longer streams of tendency as there were in the time—now apparently buried—of Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy. On the contrary, we see the spectacle, hard to credit, of innumerable tributaries and no river. In other words, there are many artists wandering in lonely byways, but no main road. These artists at intervals appear surprisingly out of the void and pass unaccountably into a future which may with equal plausibility be the disguised shape of oblivion or of fame. We simply cannot tell. There are novelists like Mr. Lawrence, so individual that they can have few imitators and no colleagues. There is Mr. David Garnett, whose field is so narrow that two in it would be a crowd. There is Mr. T. F. Powys, as narrow as Mr. Garnett, more peculiar than Mr. Lawrence, and in himself forbidding enough to scare away the most hardened of those who insist on being influenced. There are Mr. E. M. Forster and Mr. Stephen Hudson, masters of their *métiers* and therefore in no danger of being imitated. There is Mrs. Virginia Woolf, a very fine intelligence and a very intelligent sensibility, whom writers lacking her rare fusion of gifts will imitate at their peril. These writers do not swim in the same stream of tendency, and none of them incarnates "the modern consciousness" as Mr. Wells did for a little twenty years ago. There is indeed only one writer of accredited rank in England in a stream. That is Mr. Aldous Huxley, who if he does not incarnate the modern consciousness at least incarnates something modern: an attitude, a pose, or it may be a necessity of the mind. He alone of the more considerable figures writes in the same vein as a great number of writers in England all inferior to him and as a small number of writers in France who are his superiors. But one can hardly take these writers seriously, whether they are represented by Mr. Huxley or by Paul Morand. Mr. Huxley himself—if he can be separated from almost everything he has written yet—one can take seriously on account of his admitted gifts, chief of which is a graceful style. But what he says, describes, implies—his whole attitude to existence—is so senseless if it is genuine and so pointless if it is not that there is a sort of charlatanism in admiring it, as several young writers and old critics seem to do. The modern attitude of smart disillusion and up-to-date despair is not unlike the spurious romanticism of a century ago. Modify Mr. Huxley a little and he has a remarkable resemblance to Alfred de Musset. He "scorns" life as the romantics did, only in different phrases, and he cannot be exempted from the charge of trying to work all his reactions, disagreeable as well as agreeable, into a picturesque pose. But what value has that pose? And what relevance has it to art? The relevance which de Musset's romanticism had to his poetry. It made poetry fashionable for a time, and unfashionable ever since.

Several of the chief English novelists have published new works this year. There has been Mr. Huxley's "Those Barren Leaves." Mr. T. F. Powys is represented by a novel, "Mr. Tasker's Gods," in which the leaves are still more barren than Mr. Huxley's and the fruit more bitter. Mr. J. D. Beresford has repeated himself very conscientiously in "The Monkey Puzzle." Mr. Stephen Hudson's "Myrtle" has appeared, the most beautiful achievement thus far of his fine and economical art. In addition there have been two considerable novels by new writers. Mr. Geoffrey Dennis, whose "Mary Lee" made a stir in 1922, has followed it with "Harvest in Poland," which will probably make even a bigger stir, though its very considerable merits are not chiefly literary. Far more interesting as well as far quieter is Miss Marjory Strachey's first novel. It is entitled "The Nightingale" and it is an imaginative reconstruction of the life of Chopin. The theme is obviously difficult. One can imagine the life of Chopin being treated with the devastating sentimentality which English writers seldom avoid in approaching such themes, the sentimentality, for example, which makes unreadable every criticism, long or short, written on Francis Thompson. One can imagine it, again, being treated with that light English satire which is almost always too heavy and almost never wise. Miss Strachey avoids both sentimentality and satire: she renders the romance of Chopin's life, surroundings, thoughts, while strictly avoiding the romantic. She shows a rare sympathy, a rare objectivity.

The description of the composer's early life is firm and beautiful; the scenes at Nahant between Chopin and George Sand's son, the interiors of that queer and sordid household, are full of unflinching truth and economy. And the final scene is not merely very skillful in what it omits; it is intensely moving. Miss Strachey is not so good in her love scenes; she is at her best in describing the first and the last years of Chopin's life, his years of almost pure happiness and almost unalleviated suffering. Throughout she sticks closely to the actual story of Chopin's life; and like M. Maurois's "Ariel" the book is both novel and biography. There are great possibilities in this new field for the novel, and, it is not unpleasant to think, great dangers. None but writers with a certain minimum of intelligence will be able to undertake, the *métier*.

Of Mr. Dennis's novel, "Harvest in Poland," it is difficult to write. The author has not acquired any command over his art; he is full of tricks and devoid of technique; he writes very well, very badly, and always too much; and he is consistently melodramatic, a sure sign of a failure in artistic expression. But he has imagination; he sees life originally, though not so originally as he tries to make out; and one or two of the characters in the novel are real creations on the border-line between life and fantasy. The horrible and fascinating Sebastian is magnificently imagined. If the novel were on the plane of art it might conceivably be great art. But it is not on that plane. There is Mr. Dennis's stiff problem.

The last novel of note—Mr. Hudson's "Myrtle"—is also the best. It is Mr. Hudson's fifth book, but it is in no sense a repetition. Each of this author's novels has had a separate form, has been the solution of a fresh artistic problem. The articulation of each has been determined by the problem; the novel has been the concrete answer to that. It has been, in other words, an aesthetic creation; the question has been answered on the plane of art: the novel has had an aesthetic necessity—and that is a rare thing for an English novel to have. For

when the aesthetic quality is present in a novel it means not merely that a segment of life is being faithfully described, but that the presentation has an interior unity, that the novel is a world the forces of which alone create the characters and destinies of the figures in it, their actions, reactions, interests, everything. This world is autonomous and complete; the characters do not stray into it from the actual world, as, for example, Mr. Huxley's characters do; nor are they concerned with specific problems carried over from the actual world, as Mr. Galsworthy's characters are. They live in this completely evoked world of art; they are a permanent part of it. It may be said of Mr. Hudson's characters that they do this. His novels are aesthetically realized.

Thus it is almost impossible to write of the state of the novel in England today. The novel has no type at present and it is not in one state but in several. Seen from one angle the position seems hopeless. The conventional realistic novel, psycho-analytical or not, with or without sociology, has been turned out for such a long time and in such abundance that there seems no meaning in turning it out any longer. Mr. Lawrence's very exciting books are hardly contributions to the novel; they open no new doors, though they have broken most of the windows. Mr. Huxley, having begun as an original variation, has made up his mind to vary no more. Mr. Garnett writes of animals in eighteenth century prose, and does it excellently. The picture could be enlarged—but that is the English novel today. It seems to be advancing in all directions; it has no leader; it has attained no synthesis, and there is probably nobody living who could synthesize it. The most encouraging sign in all this anarchy is that more and more attention is being given to the aesthetic side of the novel. By their themes, their style, their vein of inhumanity, Mr. David Garnett's stories, for example, are made to rely, as no stories have relied in England for a long time, on their aesthetic appeal. Mr. Hudson's appeal, too, is chiefly aesthetic. And one could mention three or four other names, without dragging in "Ulysses" (certainly the grand feat of our generation), which has had very little influence on the English novel. At any rate, the sociological-psychological novel is dead. Although it is still being written, it has been found out.



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Foreign Literature

MECHTILD LICHTNOWSKY

GOETTER, KOENIGE UND TIERE IN AEGYPTEN. By MECHTILD LICHTNOWSKY. Munich: Kurt Wolff.

DAS SPIEL MIT DEM TOD. The same.

GOTT BETET. The same.

DER STIMMER. The same.

GEBURT. By MECHTILD LICHTNOWSKY. Berlin: Erich Reiss.

DER KAMPF MIT DEM FACHMANN. By MECHTILD LICHTNOWSKY. Vienna: Buchhandlung Richard Lanyi.

Reviewed by A. W. G. RANDALL

MECHTILD LICHTNOWSKY is known outside Germany as the wife of a famous Ambassador, that Prince Lichnowsky who was accredited to the Court of Saint James at the outbreak of the War and later made such sensational revelations and assertions in his diary. In her own country, however, she is quite as well known on her own account as on account of her husband, for some years ago she made herself prominent in the ranks of the younger poets, and has considerably added to her reputation by her subsequent books.

Princess Lichnowsky's first published work was a volume of sketches of a holiday in Egypt, well illustrated by photographs and drawings by herself. This was in 1913, but already the gift for vivid description and witty, subtle observation which was to distinguish her later books is apparent. In 1915 Princess Lichnowsky turned to drama and produced her "Spiel vom Tod," described as "nine pictures for marionettes." It is really a series of allegories of the essential beneficence of Death, with some beautiful poetical passages, and certain passages of light relief. The following year Princess Lichnowsky produced a volume of prose-poems, "Gott Betet," a series of monologues in which the Creator apostrophises his creature. The mysticism and obscure symbolism of both play and poems caused Princess Lichnowsky to be numbered with the "Expressionist" school and, so far as that vague and all-too-comprehensive label—as generally used—meant that there was a tendency in her imagination to get away from mere externals, from the impressions of things, the description sufficed. But that Princess Lichnowsky had none of the deliberate eccentricity or forced rhetoric often associated with German "Expressionists" was soon shown in her story, "Der Stimmer." There can be few books more difficult to review in short space than this simple but profoundly subtle and penetrating little novel, which tells the story, or rather uncovers the soul, of a humble, despised piano-tuner who, within, is a perfect artist, passionately devoted to music but denied the opportunity of making himself technically proficient. All the paths of frustrated artistic genius is in this novel.

"Geburt" is a much longer work and treats a wider theme, the gradual awakening of a boy of twenty to intellectual ideas, to love, to spiritual reflection. As briefly summarized thus, the story sounds banal, but Princess Lichnowsky's treatment of the subject is remarkably fresh and original. How acute a penetration she has into the boy's mind, into the mind of Vewi, the girl he vainly falls in love with; how apparently artless, and yet how essential to this revivifying of an old theme, the abrupt asides she puts into the mouths of her characters or interpolates herself—something of the technique employed by James Joyce in "Ulysses," but with much more restraint, much more sparingly. Those who like the "straight-through" novel of character or history and tolerate with difficulty anything which departs from the general run of description mingled with dialogue, will turn from "Geburt" and label it "obscure" or, as certain German critics have done, "Expressionistic," as if that label killed. But anyone with an interest in the renewal of the art of fiction will see in Princess Lichnowsky's latest novel a useful and interesting experiment.

"Der Kampf mit dem Fachmann"—how are we to render the full flavor of the phrase? It is a series of witty reflections on and imaginary conversations with that type of "expert" who sets himself up against "lay" opinion and dogmatizes with the most unshakable self-complacency about subjects on which superior knowledge is often of far less use than a little common sense. It is, as Princess Lichnowsky explains, the an-

tithesis between "a thinking person and a dogmatist, between a clever child and a stupid adult, between a gifted scholar and a crazy schoolmaster." And in giving examples of the "fight with the expert" Princess Lichnowsky displays such humor, such a keen eye for individual peculiarity as to encourage the hope that her next work may be a humorous play of character or a novel of social satire such as few in Germany today are as well qualified as she is to write.

Foreign Notes

GERMANY publishes each year approximately the same number of books that are brought out annually in England, France, and the United States combined. What the sixty million Germans read is, consequently, a question of some importance. A month ago, *Nimm und Lies!* ("Take and Read!") that quite lusty even if youthful monthly—it is now in its third year—sent out a questionnaire with the idea of securing reliable information on this point. The replies totaled 750, which is rather remarkable in view of the fact that a reply obligated the remitter to remit. These 750 readers voted for 373 different books. In this we see the Germans running true to form: where two or three of them are gathered together there are two or three different opinions.

The work most frequently demanded was Hermann Löns's posthumous "Gedanken und Gestalten" ("Thoughts and Figures"). Attached to this is obviously a measure of retrospective sentimentality. Löns is a combination of Joyce Kilmer and Rupert Brooks without being either of them. He was killed at the front at the very beginning of the war and though he left but three slender volumes of rather vague outdoorism, there has come into being a regular Löns cult. Second to him ranked, oddly enough, Gustav Freytag's "Bilder aus der Deutschen Vergangenheit" ("Pictures from the German Past"). This is odd, for Freytag and Löns are poles removed from each other at every point and from every point of view. Freytag is about as sensible a person as ever wrote in the German language. Romanticism he knew not; for realism he did not seem to care; nor was he a rationalist. He was a plain man of the people who advised the Germans, at every opportunity that he could call into being, to work. It is hardly this phase of his output however, that is attracting the Germans of today; it would seem, rather, at this distance that they scent something alluring in the very title of his old book (1862): pictures from Germany's past.

Other works that received "quite a number of votes" are: Alfred Lichtmark's "Reisebriefe," Emil Ludwig's "Genie und Character," Maximilian Harden's "Köpfe," Ernst Fuhrmann's "Geschichte der Germanen," and—of course—Rudolf Herzog's last bit of fictionalized popularity, "Wieland der Schmied," a novel that tells—of course—a corking good love story, revives the old German legend of Wieland the Smith and ties this in with French occupation of the Ruhr. As to all the other books that were voted for, there are but two whose authors have ever been heard of on this side of the Atlantic: Sven Hedin's "From Peking to Moscow" and Wilhelm Raabe's "Abu Telfan."

Had there been anything regional in the way this campaign was conducted, an explanation of its results might be easy. As it is, we can only repeat that favorite remark of the undergraduate engaged in the attempt to learn to speak German like a native (of the United States): *Das verstehe ich nicht.*

In "Le Desert de L'Amour" (Paris: Grasset), Francois Mauriac is said to have produced a novel that in delicacy of understanding, dignity, and interest marks a new advance in his work. The book is the chronicle of the love of three men for a woman of commonplace personality and interests, and its interest is partially derived from the fact that of her suitors two are father and son. There is, however, nothing melodramatic about the story.

Under the title "Intérieurs" (Paris: Plon-Nourrit), Albert Thibaudet, one of the most eminent critics of present-day France, has collected three studies of nineteenth century writers. His essays on Baudelaire, Fromentin, and Amiel are well worth the reading.

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