News and Views of Literary London
By HERBERT W. HORWILL
New York Times (1923-Current file); Mar 1, 1942;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2008)
pg. BR8

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LONDON.

ONE important result of recent efforts to extend the field of fiction, according to an article by Anne Owtram in The Guardian, has been the more frequent presentation of characters not taken from the writer's own surroundings. The novelist, it is true, has always seized upon types whose atmosphere was unfamiliar, but these have usually been drawn objectively. The new tendency is to deal with them from within. The novelist not only shows an acquaintance with the details of their lives—that could be acquired by any one who took sufficient trouble—but evidently feels an inexplicable affinity with the people themselves. Miss Owtram suggests that this intuitive and illumined understanding is, perhaps, what we mean by "inspiration."

In this critic's opinion, however, there is one instance in which this mysterious inspiration comes short of success. It fails in the understanding of types which are mentally very far below that of the author. Inspiration is not on tap to connect the educated with the uneducated. Members of the higher class cannot think the thoughts of those who live on the lowest mental plane. The novelist is, of necessity, a bourgeois, and must be possessed of a certain degree of culture. Hence the failure of recent attempts to found a school of the proletarian novel. Miss Owtram has observed this failure particularly in the case of the so-called "non-commercial" short story, so often used for the interpretation, by post-graduates, of the feelings of young servant girls or farm laborers.

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THE question of the short story in general has just been discussed by The Times Literary Supplement in a full-length and warmly appreciative review of H. E. Bates's new book on the subject, supplemented by an editorial. It begins by calling attention to the service rendered by the magazine press of the last half century in giving the short story its present variety and popularity. It suggests that Mr. Bates perhaps rates this kind of fiction too highly as a literary form, for it is a common experience that even the most accomplished short stories have a way of being esthetically unsatisfying. This may be due to a certain shapelessness which so many talented writers seem unable to avoid. That quality of imaginative completeness which resides only in formal unity eludes them more often than not. They are powerless to prevent the transmuted and significantly shaped substance of experience from slipping through their hands. As a result, the short story, as practiced today, tends to be very much a hit-or-miss affair.

The reviewer thinks there is a good deal of truth in Mr. Bates's theory of a subtle connection between the evolution of the short story and the evolution of the general reader, whose enlarged experience makes it possible nowadays for the writer to dispense with the oppressive obligation of lavish descriptive detail. The modern short story, in its ability to take for granted much that was formerly elaborated, is the achievement of both writer and reader, and in that sense it is an essentially "democratic" literary form. He also endorses Mr. Bates's opinion that the translation into English of the great Russian writers has been by far the most potent influence from outside upon the short story both in England and in America. He dissents, however, from Mr. Bates's dictum that, if an author's imaginative values are right, all the rest will be added unto him. For the modern short story writer fails more often through sheer lack of narrative resource or discipline than through low or imperfect values.

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WE are so used to having the half-digested workings of the younger poets offered to us as "modern poetry," remarks Sheila Shannon, that we tend to forget that there is no such thing. No poet is unaffected by the age he lives in, but the great poets make use of tradition and the continuity of human experience to produce something more enduring than the poems of a season. . . According to The Manchester Guardian, recent books by psychologists on the problems of war have, on the whole, been disappointing. Too often they have merely been an attempt at filing a simple selection of the very complicated facts into the convenient system of pigeon-holes provided by psychoanalysis.

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JOHN BROPHY notes that writers who hang together, who work as a tug-of-war team hauling upon certain ideas, often make a greater contemporary stir than their talents justify, and so secure for themselves and their movement an enlarged niche in literary history.