

AMERICAN NOVELS CONTRASTED TO BRITISH

from "What's American and What's British in the Modern Novel"

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English novels in the main remain stubbornly neat. American novels, on the other hand, sprawl like America itself... Americans, it seems, want to get everything into a novel. Otherwise excellent books, such as Ross Lockridge's *Raintree County*... Dos Passos' novels--even the early ones, but particularly his last--suffer from artistic incoherence because they try to include too much experience. The result is ambiguity and confusion....

Recent English novels, under the reign, one might say, of Virginia Woolf, have tended to deal more and more exclusively with personal relationships. American novels, even vulgar ones, pose their people in relationship not merely to other individuals but to some aspect of society--to anti-Semitism, to homosexuality as a social phenomenon, to the crime of irresponsible power, to the individual's place in the scheme of things.... American authors insist on setting their characters against a background of events in an external world: of meaningful events in a world of standards and values.... For the Americans, man is still largely "a political animal." The English, however, tend to see him as an isolated individual spinning his own ties with other isolated individuals....

The English find it natural nowadays to step into a landscape bound by the emotions of a handful of individuals, while Americans do not. Americans must fight for the right to memorialize such landscapes... The English writer does not--again, since Lawrence--confront a bad society with a good society. It is as if the contemporary British novelist were giving expression to the assumptions and fears of the Victorian exponents of *laissez faire*; as if he could not conceive of a good society....

The great American novelists--and by this adjective I mean Faulkner, Warren and Hemingway--cannot get away from the problem of society. Hemingway tried. His first two novels, which artistically are his best, were concerned exclusively with personal relationships [untrue]. Yet he moved on from there--moved forward in feeling, perhaps, backward in execution. Colonel Cantwell, in *Across the River and into the Trees*, engaged on that most personal of all enterprises--dying--cannot merely die. He must "make a good end." He cannot simply enjoy hunting and love. He must discourse in his last hours on duty and honor, on war and politics. Robert Penn Warren, of course, is concerned explicitly with the relationship of the individual to society. His novels seethe with politics, with the problem of power. As for Faulkner, he is so invaded by the responsibility of the individual to society that he has raised it out of the political realm to that of ethics. Seemingly he writes about personal problems, but to Faulkner every personal problem is related to the greater one....

American authors, of course, suffer from the defects of their qualities. Their most obvious fault is that they write more clumsily than the English, who write beautifully, as a bird flies or a skater glides [the opposite of Richard Chase's generalization]. Willa Cather's exquisite prose style has had little influence on current novelists. Fitzgerald's emotional penetration is entirely individual, and Hemingway's much-copied curtness is a two-edged weapon in any hands but that of its originator. [This Feminist critic overlooks Katherine Anne Porter, Caroline Gordon, Flannery O'Connor, and Eudora Welty--all with "exquisite" styles.]. Among the British, however, there are many stylists: Elizabeth Bowen, Elizabeth Taylor, Henry Green and always Virginia Woolf offer a pure enjoyment that *no American can match*. For writing is not particularly important to Americans [!]. Could it be to any nation that could produce a Dreiser? Rather, like Dreiser, they want to say something. They are reporters, come-outers, reformers [Janeway also seems

unfamiliar with the exquisite prose styles of Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Stephen Crane, and Kate Chopin. Italics added.]...

On the other hand, the atmosphere of idea and intention and philosophy, of social penetration, which pervades American writing gives it an extra dimension which makes many brilliant English novels seem small in comparison.... The typical fault of the Americans, it seems to me, is to undertake to subdue a relative excess of material. Too often, on the other hand, the English novelist smothers his selected material with an excess of art and formal accomplishment until he seems to be writing better and better about less and less [a criticism usually made of Henry James].... I do not mean to belittle these absorbing, beautifully written and constructed English novels. Still, to an American they do not seem to add up to enough; they seem almost neurotically afraid to generalize, as if the forest could not be seen for the trees. Is it, do you suppose, that the earth-slip of social classes in England has reduced her writers to snatching at those things nearest to them emotionally for their subjects, since all else is in turmoil?

Americans, still Henry James' grand naifs, isolated, searching for answers in a confusion of heterogeneous, traditionless social groups, accepting insufficient and false answers too easily, still know that the Answer is the great and necessary thing. They believe, moreover, that an answer can be found.... Immature American writers certainly tend to be cut off in their prime not so much by Hollywood gold and the lure of the best seller list as by a frightening ability to lose their way. This stems partly, no doubt, from our lack of education; it is also the negative side of our attempt to bring new territory within the bounds of literature. An English writer seems to be able to work and rework the same field, producing, by intensive farming, continued crops... American fields do not thrive under such a system; they wear out and grow barren, as Farrell's Chicago and Erskine Caldwell's Georgia have grown barren. We must be, it seems, extensive farmers. The frontier of literature has not closed and when we do not pioneer we grow stale. Perhaps the graves of our lost writers mark the trail to some new California where--who knows?--the great city may really belong to the angels.

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