

# THE LITERARY DIGEST

April 15, 1922

## OUR LIMPING CIVILIZATION

**A**MERICANS MUST LOVE to have their ears boxed by foreigners, else their newspapers would not be so hospitable to the "opinions" of foreign visitors. In one issue the New York *Herald* has four different articles dealing with different phases of American civilization from which one might derive the conviction that such a commodity has no existence in fact. Our critics in these cases are British and French. One of the former declares that "any citizen of the United States who strives to be an artist in his own land finds himself practically without patronage for the simple reason that Americans in general have no critical faculty whatever." This is a bouncer and may be considered in the light of the fact that Mr. C. R. W. Nevinson, who makes it, complains that he couldn't sell his pictures here. Of course, he hurriedly goes on with a magnificent disclaimer: "Any Americans who have the idea that I am merely annoyed by a lack of financial success among them are quite wrong; on the contrary, I regard that failure as a splendid compliment." Here is even more critical magnanimity:

"It is they who are annoyed that it should have occurred to a stranger to go out and paint New York, the most wonderful city in the world, when American artists were being driven across the Atlantic to paint old bits of Paris.

"My! they said to themselves in wrath, 'that you should have painted *our* city!'

"I am, then, not in the least bit prejudiced against the United States. I still believe that their holy city is the most wonderful city in all the world. I think that American architects are the only architects we have. I think that Americans have the opportunity of being great sculptors.

"Their Russian and German element are keen supporters of music. The population in general has a fine feeling for literature. And when one comes to the art of living, I agree that the American hotel is an admirable institution. Yet just as they have nothing in the United States quite like the quiet dignity of our Claridge's so in pictorial art the American citizen must come to Europe, and particularly to London, if he is to keep abreast of his own generation.

"They see that for themselves in so far as the acquisition of paintings of another day goes. Thanks to English buyers who spend most of their time in Europe, America has now many art collections which I willingly grant are first-rate. Yet because of that lack of a living critical faculty they will only buy the gilt-edged dead. They are unaware that in the world to-day there are several artists as good as Degas, the equal of Monet.



### *"Unprejudiced Against the United States"*

*Mr. Nevinson, a  
British artist, whose  
works did not sell here,  
avers that Americans  
in general have no critical  
faculty whatever*

## Nevinson in New York

"Here emphatically they have lost their courage. They are afraid to buy what they like; they rely entirely on the auction-room value. To read the American art news is like reading our *Financial Times*. The American art critic has no use for a picture which does not tell a story. . . .

"An explanation of the death of the critical faculty in American art is that nobody has the facilities to see modern paintings.



They have facilities to read books. They have patronage for architects and sculptors. They have facilities for the illustrator; for the painter—no. There is no system of distribution; in all the big cities of America outside New York there are not more than fifty dealers. Facilities do exist, scholarships and art schools, and so forth, for driving a man into art, but nothing is done for him when he ought to be earning his living.

"They will say nice words in praise of American artists and they will support the growing chauvinist movement for American art. But they will not buy American pictures; that is the last step that occurs to anybody. In this respect the women are more responsible than their men.

"The absence of a critical faculty not only impels Americans to trust the auction room, to invest in the gilt-edged dead, to avoid their own native talent. It has the most alarming consequences for the artists themselves. The real artists of New York, by whom I mean the adventurers in art, the creators, have to earn their living as draymen or waiters, achieving their intellectual work when they are dead beat with manual labor."

A segment of "New York by Night" (1922) by C.R.W. Nevinson

Perhaps Mr. Nevinson wishes to be taken as speaking "ironically" for we find in his "fare-

well to America," printed in the *London Nation and Athenaeum*, this amid much of a similar nature:

"Good-by to the land where grotesque exaggeration is called humor, and people gape in bewilderment at irony, as a bullock gapes at a dog straying in his field! Good-by to the land where strangers say 'Glad to meet you, sir,' and really seem glad. I am going to a land of ancient speech where we never say we are glad to meet a stranger, and seldom are; where humor is understatement and irony is our habitual resource in danger or distress; where children are told they are meant to be seen and not heard, where it is 'bad form' to express emotion, and suspenders are a strictly feminine article of attire. Good-by, America! I am going home."

Turning to a French critic, we find that Professor Albert Feuillerat says something of the same kind of American students. Residing temporarily at Yale he finds that "in things of the mind the American student is too docile." His faith in his teacher is so great that it "blunts the critical sense and the desire for originality." Writing in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (Paris) of his "Six Months at Yale University" he says:

"I have sometimes wished to encounter more resistance to my ideas, less admiring submission. It is a curious thing, these young men, capable of throwing themselves madly into battle, these born adventurers who find fierce delight in surmounting real obstacles, are almost pusillanimous when they have to engage in a struggle with ideas.

"That comes without doubt from their being trained to learn rather than to think. It is a tendency of education which when pushed to excess reacts against the end sought. In all stages

## *Nevinson in New York*

of education students are urged not to lose sight of the real. Whether in a drawing, in mathematics, in history, always the same desire appears to make knowledge of practical utility. All that is purely bookish is condemned, all that is based on observation is lauded. Thus is developed little by little the idea that in all mental work the facts are the essential thing, that without them the thought is of no consequence. A great truth in itself, but one which leads by a treacherous descent to the error of supposing that the facts are more important than the thought, that they are the only things that count.

"The best among the students rebel against this narrow dogma; a great number, I fear, accept it implicitly as indisputable. One sees it in the avidity with which in newspapers, in lectures the public seeks concrete facts, anecdotes, in short, everything that is called information. One sees it in the taste for statistics which is general, and in this art Americans are past masters. Now what is the pursuit of statistics but the idolatry of facts erected into a science?"

A third protestor, served up by the *Herald*, is of American origin but of European training and alliance. She is Marquise Clara Lanza, daughter of Surgeon-General Hammond of the Union Army, and a friend and collaborator of George Moore. She writes thus of our present-day school of realistic fiction:

"What passes for realism in fiction has all the earmarks of a pose. It is modernism gone mad. It is not a truthful exposition of life, nor does it give us anything worth while. Select a batch of the most widely read and discust novels of recent publication—'Main Street,' 'Erik Dorn,' 'Moon Calf,' 'Cytherea,' 'Brass' and those much lauded English importations, 'Ursula Trent,' 'Coquette' and 'Dangerous Ages'—and what do we find? Not one fine or noble character, not a single sentiment reflecting the higher and better emotions of the human heart. The best of the lot is perhaps 'Doc' Kinnicott in Sinclair Lewis's 'best seller,' who at times arouses in us something akin to admiration. But as a whole they are a sorry crowd. The women, when they are not insufferably dull or neurotic, are pleasure-loving dolls without sufficient moral stamina to prevent their toppling headlong into the first pitfall that yawns before them. On every page Sex stalks triumphant. The men believe in nothing. They are superegoists, devoid of ideals and aspirations, hard, arrogant and vicious. All, men and women alike, are soulless, spiritually dead, disillusioned and weary of existence before they have begun to live. We search vainly for the refreshing touch of humor so prized in the novelists of old, and we fail to sense that redeeming breath of genius that renders the author a law unto himself.

"Much has been said and written concerning the superior workmanship displayed by these young writers, but, with one or two exceptions, I have not been able to discover it. The style of 'Main Street' is that of a reporter on a daily paper, correct enough, but totally lacking in distinction or grace. In 'Erik Dorn' it is jerky, blazing and sputtering along like a pack of firecrackers to which a lighted match has been applied. In 'Cytherea,' with its two sharply contrasted types of womanhood—the mother and the harlot—which is the whole book, the sentences are often so clumsily constructed that one has to read them over several times before the author's meaning can be grasped. In 'The Narrow House,' tremendously praised, we are introduced to the most disgusting family conceivable, described in choppy syllables, and with a *Leitmotif* that impels the various members to dash up-stairs at stated intervals and cast themselves upon beds and chairs."

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