

The Forum
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America Produces a Novelist

ALL the qualities that make the average American novel the sweet, caressing, gaudy thing it is are absent from *The Man of Promise*, by Willard Huntington Wright. I have searched it from end to end for any trace of what is called Optimism, and in vain. There is no mention in it of sex hygiene, the Biltmore roof, German spies, Palm Beach, Wall Street, or the *corps diplomatique*. The hero, though of agreeable physique and respectably dressed, bears no resemblance whatever to a Leyendecker collar model. He has no low, flashy racing-car to convey him upon his libidinous enterprises—nor, indeed, any other internal combustion vehicle—and never either makes or loses so much as a single dollar in the stock market. His polygamy is confined, over a stretch of nearly twenty-five years, to but four women, all of them unmarried when he meets them, and not one of them ever saves him from drink, or helps him to escape the police by hiding him in her bedroom, or gets him the secretaryship at Rome by making love to a United States Senator. His own conduct in matters of amour is singularly heretical. He never hugs any of his four loves in a taxicab after the opera, or drags any of them to a sinister roadhouse in Westchester, or addresses any of them in such terms as “You are like wine, little woman!” He is never wounded in France, or anywhere else, and thus lures none of the four into the Red Cross. He is never suspected of felony. He is never indicted or elected to office. He wins no prizes and makes no fortune. And as we leave him at last he is not rolling his eyes in ecstasy but grinning sardonically, and not heated up by love but cooled off. . . .

§2

In brief, a hero of quite unusual kidney, a hero almost unprecedented in latter-day American fiction. And in a book no less uncommon than he is—a book that challenges curiosity at the very start by appearing without the customary cigar-band slipcover, and in cloth of a somber maroon. (Even Dreiser's novels, remember, were bound by the intelligent Harpers in a figured cloth that might have made a Mother Hubbard for a charwoman.) And within? Within one finds, instead of the familiar journalese, a style that is careful, and graceful, and austere; and instead of the familiar looseness and incoherence, a delicate and accurate sense of form; and instead of the familiar prodigality of external action, an almost uninterrupted presentation of inward struggles; and instead of the familiar cheap mouthing of platitudes and imbecilities, an intelligible and interesting idea, competently worked out. The net result is a novel that, after the other fiction of the day, seems almost arctic in its restraint and aloofness, its elaborate avoidance of the maudlin, but that still leaves upon the mind an impression of curiously poignant drama, a conviction that something human and significant has been depicted in just the right way, a sense of genuine artistic achievement. There is, indeed, a touch of the Greek spirit in it. It is straightforward, clearly-designed, economical in its emotions, deft in its means. It makes its appeal, not to the tear ducts and the midriff, but to the centres of reflection, and they respond to it with a joyousness that is the product of long disuse. . . . Such novels are as rare in the United States as good music. They come but little oftener than the American symphony which so perversely never comes at all. Even when, as

in this case, they fall a bit short of their apparent aim, they yet must give delight as evidences of a serious purpose that may yet bring in a great harvest, and that, in any case, is of value and dignity on its own account. Before fiction of the first rank may be written among us it must be tried again and again by men who are willing to fail. I think that Wright, barring Dreiser, has failed less than any other of the new generation. . . .

§3

The idea underlying the book is neither very startling nor very new, though its appearance in an American novel is both. You will find it in Nietzsche, and in Max Stirner before him, not to say in Arthur Schopenhauer. It is, in a few words, the idea that the influence of women upon a man of any intellectual enterprise and originality, far from being inspirational, as the ladies themselves would have us believe, is often cruelly hampering, and that in this business of holding him down what are conventionally called good women may be quite as potent and quite as relentless as what are conventionally called bad women. You will find the doctrine in *Menschliches allzu Menschliches*, §431- 434:

“The natural inclination of women to a quiet, uniform and peaceful existence operates adversely to the heroic impulse of the masculine free spirit. Without being aware of it, women act like a person who would remove stones from the path of a mineralogist, lest his feet should be bruised by them—forgetting entirely that he is faring forth for the very purpose of coming into contact with them. . . . The wives of men with lofty aspirations cannot resign themselves to seeing their husbands suffering, impoverished and slighted, even though it be apparent that this suffering proves, not only that its victim has chosen his attitude aright, but also that his aims, some day at least, are likely to be realized. . . . Women always intrigue in secret against the higher souls of their husbands. They seek to cheat the future for the sake of a painless and agreeable past. . . .”

Nietzsche, it would seem, here stopped at a half truth, and so fell into an uncharacteristic error. That is to say, he assumed that this conservatism of women was altruistic, that its object was the safety and comfort of the man. The truth is, of course, that it is far more easily explicable on selfish grounds, that it is easier to believe the woman seeking (perhaps unconsciously) her own comfort than to believe her seeking the man's comfort. His future is thus sacrificed to her past. . . . This, at all events, is what Wright is plainly saying in his book, and the fact fortunately frees him from the charge of standing wholly upon Nietzsche's shoulders—a charge of terrible deadliness in this year of Our Lord, with the pious of two hemispheres growing hysterical at the mere mention of the mad Prussian's name.

§4

Wright's protagonist, a young American named Stanford West, is a fellow of inquiring habit and intellectual audacity—one who is moved by an obscure inner necessity, as Joseph Conrad calls it, to question some of the dearest axioms of his day and race, and one, moreover, with skill enough at the dialectic to do his questioning in a manner that commands attention. In brief, an iconoclast, a heretic, a revolutionist—but one whose fine frenzy is steadily choked out of him by women's arms. The business begins at college, where he rebels against academic stupidity and cowardice, thinking very well of himself for his courage. He expects, not unnaturally, a word of proud approval from home; it is his first battle, and he has done some very effective fighting. He is astounded to find that his mother is greatly grieved by the news, and that she regards him as disgraced, and herself no less. This is Lesson No. 1. Lesson No. 2 comes swiftly upon its heels. This time his enemy is his first mistress, a college charmer who flatters him vastly by publicly falling in love with him. He

sees in her a sure refuge from contumely and misunderstanding; he finds in her only a new foe, for her demand that he be attentive stands immovably in the way of that indefatigable labor which alone can get him anywhere. Comes now mistress the second and Lesson No. 3. Her crude harrowing of his emotions—her introduction into his life of the grosser melodrama of love—reduces him to exhaustion, impotence and bewilderment.

Then comes his wife. Again the refuge that turns out a battlefield. She is his mother over again. She wants him to be famous, to bathe her in reflected glory, but she shrinks from all struggle. The first shock of his new offensive reduces her to puerile whining. He gives over his ideas, his aspirations, his life-work, and descends to facile novel-writing to soothe her vanity. Success of a sort comes to him; he becomes a well-known man; his wife basks in the glow of it. But the old inward urging still tortures him, and before his self-respect is all gone a chance of release seems to offer itself. He runs off with a woman who appears to be the rare miracle, the woman unlike all other women. But this delusion, of course, quickly yields up its kernel of bitter truth. The miracle is hocus-pocus; the immemorial arms are around his neck; he is dragged off his high horse once more. . . .

In the end it is his daughter who finishes him. In order that she may have her share of happiness in the world, he sacrifices his own. As we part from him he is a professor in a fresh-water college at home, the successor of his honored father, a safe and sane man at last! His wife triumphs in his salvation; he is her masterpiece, the supreme fruit of her love. She sees only the smug smirk of the convert in his smile of tragic irony. . . .

§5

As I have said, Wright has done his story with great painstaking, and it shows a symmetry and bears a polish that are very rare in American fiction, or, for that matter, in English fiction. John Galsworthy works in somewhat the same fashion, but there are important points of difference. For one thing, *The Man of Promise* is harder and more formal in structure than any novel of Galsworthy that comes to mind and for another thing it lacks Galsworthy's mellowness, his middle-aged toleration, his visible feeling that nothing really matters. Wright is a far younger man, and the fine fieriness of youth is still in him: he takes even a work of fiction seriously. There is, indeed, almost too harsh an earnestness in his book, and, by the same token, too meticulous a finish. As a document in psychology, it is too well-made, as the plays of Scribe were too well-made on the side of mere intrigue. One gets a sniff of the laboratory.

But this, after all, is a merit as well as a defect, for the thing that the current American novel most sorely needs, even above that uncompromising intellectual honesty which Dreiser is almost alone in showing, is a greater sense of logic in structure, a more careful thinking out, a better management of rhythm and organization. Our novels are too often mere collections of materials, ill-selected and wholly undigested. They aim in one direction and proceed in another; they are full of inconsistencies, impossibilities, absurdities; the impression they leave is vague and uncertain. Wright, with his constant interest in the problems of aesthetic form, has planned his book with much more care and skill. There is in it an unaccustomed air of the studied, of the sophisticated, of the well reasoned. As an essay in form, indeed, it is almost as interesting as it is as a social document. One might divide it into movements like a symphony, and give them the usual labels. First movement (*allegro*): West's first statements of his revolutionary creed, and his clashes with his mother and his two mistresses. Second movement (*adagio*): his marriage and the days of his weak surrender. Third movement (*scherzo*): his flight with Evelyn Naesmith, and the false renaissance of his soul. Finale (*moderato*): his disillusionment, his return to America, and his spiritual suicide. . . .

§6

After all, some such structure is probably hidden in all serious works of art, no matter what their medium. The symphonic (or, more accurately, sonata) form cannot be purely arbitrary. If it were, it would be holding up less vigorously after a century and a quarter. There must be some inner necessity for it in our method of receiving aesthetic sensations; it must have a reasonableness inherent in its very nature. Perhaps old Papa Haydn, in giving it to us, gave us something greater than we have ever suspected. Beethoven, at all events, felt that a symphony was something a good deal more alive, so to speak, than a mere collection of movements—that it had a definite and coherent personality. He conceived his works, indeed, as visible structures, almost with physical shape. Whether or not Mozart did the same we don't know, but there is surely something of the sort in the Jupiter symphony: to cut out twenty measures anywhere in it would be like cutting off an ear. One senses that profound design, too, in such works as *Germinal* and *The Titan*: every detail of their structure seems inevitable, unescapable. Even *Barry Lyndon* has it. It might be called, somewhat plausibly, Thackeray's *kleine sinfonie in F dur*, and like Beethoven's, it is one of his best. The defect in *The "Genius"* is simply that there is no design, that the moving point wanders out into space and is lost. The same thing is true of *McTeague*. . . .

A thorough inquiry into form in art awaits some venturesome psychologist. What is the psychological secret of the sonnet, of the Gothic arch, of the sonata form? So far as I know, no satisfactory answer has ever been made. . . .

§7

But in all this we are forgetting *The Man of Promise*. What remains to be said of it is brief. A first novel which suggests a first novel almost not at all, its defects are yet those inherent in the work of a beginning novelist. It is, as I have said before, just a shade too relentless and scientific in its manner; the author has hung to his text with a pertinacity which might have been relaxed now and then without loss. You will find the same fierce gusto in the earlier novels of George Moore, and even in those of his middle period. Moore is now rewriting them, conditioning them, mellowing them. Perhaps Wright, in twenty years, will do the same with *The Man of Promise*. But even as it stands, it is incomparably above the common run of fiction in English. It hangs together, it gets somewhere, it is an authentic work of art. The very excess of zeal in it makes for a subtle charm; it radiates a sort of eloquence. . . . Such novels are too rare among us to be passed over lightly. This one deserves all the praise it is getting from the discriminating. Even more, it deserves all the abuse it is getting from the stupid. . . .