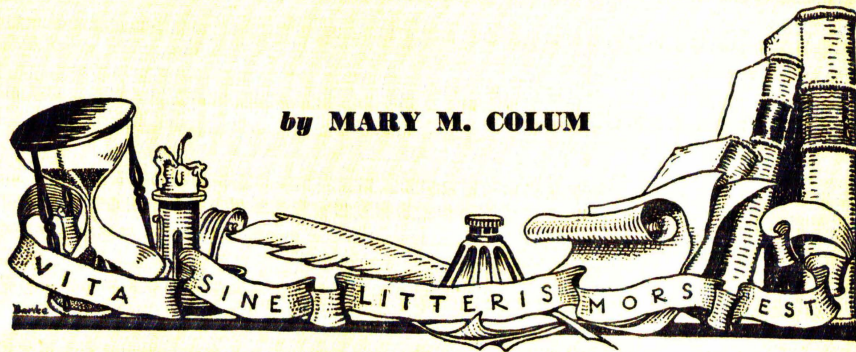


Life and Literature

Are Women Outsiders?*

by MARY M. COLUM



VERY FEW WOMEN of outstanding distinction in their own professions are what are called feminists—at least not in the old-fashioned sense of the term, which implied some admixture of sex antagonism, some feeling of grievance against the male. The women of first-rate talents and high positions have, in our own time, anyhow, seldom been hindered by men; they have indeed generally been given a helping hand by the men at the top, no matter what scratches they may have received from disgruntled males who are their inferiors in ability. This is one of the reasons, perhaps, why Virginia Woolf, in *Three Guineas*, would like to have the word *feminist* expunged from the dictionary. Nevertheless, among women who have made their mark there seems to be a new outcropping of feminism—or call it what you will.

Virginia Woolf's own *Three Guineas* is the most overtly feminist book I have read since the literature of the old suffrage days, while Dorothy Thompson's less overt *Political Guide* is likewise an indication of such a trend. Vera Brittain's *Thrice a Stranger* is feminist, too, but more in the mode of the old suffrage days, while Gertrude Atherton's *Can Women Be Gentlemen?* is feminist in a personal way: She remembers the scratches by the male feline.

* EDITOR'S NOTE:—The recent books discussed by Mrs. Colum in this article are: Dorothy Thompson's *Political Guide* (Stackpole, \$1.25) and *Refugees: Anarchy or Organization?* (Random House, \$1.00), by Dorothy Thompson; *Three Guineas*, by Virginia Woolf (Harcourt, Brace, \$2.50); *Thrice a Stranger*, by Vera Brittain (Macmillan, \$3.00); *Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (Macmillan, \$5.00).

I have met with more meanness [she writes], spite, petty jealousy from men than from any member of my own sex. . . . Women take pride in the success of other women, but men seem to resent it as a personal insult.

However, she does say that the only spiteful, mean and petty men she knew were "knights of the pen in one way or another."

But the new outcropping of feminism is not an attempt to get back at male scratchings. It is a response, I believe, to the dangerous forms that masculine dominance is taking in the world today. Some clear-sighted women are discovering that, in spite of the advances women have made in the past half-century, they still cut very little figure where international affairs are concerned. The mitered abbesses in the Middle Ages had probably more of a say in settling affairs of import to large populations than have the highly educated, highly trained women of this day and age.

THE OUTSIDERS' SOCIETY

BY SUGGESTING, in her *Three Guineas*, an association of women that might be called the Outsiders' Society, Virginia Woolf incites a number of ideas.

First, we cannot help but be struck with the implication that women are outsiders even more largely than Virginia Woolf implies. That they are indeed outsiders we cannot help perceiving when decisions of international import are, as at the moment when I write this, being made. This is still a man's world, governed and directed in things of supreme importance by

men who can land the whole world in war without consulting women as a sex.

This man-governed world has not brought happiness to enough people; a large number find life tolerable only when they are a little doped by drink or drugs. The enormous trouble that governments take to keep people from drugging themselves, to abolish the drug traffic, the trouble that some governments take from time to time to keep people from intoxicating themselves with liquor—these are proof enough that, whatever men have done to advance the world, they have not directed or created a civilization in which people are happy. The few women in high governing positions have so much pressure on them through competition with men that they have not had sufficient opportunities for working on or putting forward what might be the specially feminine contribution.

What is this specially feminine contribution? From all that women have expressed in writing, not only in pure literature but in that particularly modern form of feminine expression, political commentating (the work of political publicists like Dorothy Thompson and Anne O'Hare McCormick), the feminine contribution would appear to derive from the fact that women believe in happiness, want happiness for themselves and their children, whereas men believe in something else, want something else—power or success or glory.

The urge toward happiness has not made much of a furrow in the world; it appears to be cherished as an aspiration toward something that might be achieved after death in the haunts of the pagan world or the heaven of the Christians. Gertrude Atherton notes that she heard a priest over the radio announce that happiness is reserved for the next world and is not to be attained in this. So indeed we have all heard.

In any case, this feminine belief in happiness has not had much chance in this world. But indeed women have had so much trouble in getting anywhere at all and in getting any education at all that it is a matter for wonder that their ideas have made even as much impression as they have.

THE WARRIOR'S RECREATION

IT MIGHT BE well if those women who believe that the influence of their sex in world

affairs has been augmented in the last half-century pondered a little on what has happened in Europe this fall, on what, as I write this, is happening. Men are holding or have been holding councils everywhere, with the avowed object of keeping the world out of war, with the object of seeing how much can be salvaged of that civilization which mankind has built up. They are also deciding what will happen to the children born since the last war, the fate of young people starting life together, the fate of all the little careers, all the little businesses that our younger generation (like all the past younger generations) has started to build up for itself. What role are women playing while all these councils are being held, while hundreds of thousands of uniformed men are being deployed in maneuvers?

Well, for all the influence they visibly exert we might as well be back in the Dark Ages. While the daily papers are filled with accounts of tense happenings, the part taken by women in them seems to be limited to the role of some female nurses who have been applying hot compresses to Marshal Goering's leg, said leg having been put out of commission through the physical strain of standing for hours in Nuremberg watching and saluting parades of marching men. In addition to the first aid supplied to this leg, the female sex is credited with another achievement: Lady Runciman is described as doing her bit by helping her husband out in the matter of a German vocabulary. Of course, if we allow our imaginations to run riot a little, we may behold a vision of women as the "warrior's relaxation" after all the speechifying and saluting and the marching and the councils are over for the day.

For the rest, no women take part in the councils that are to decide the fate of them and their children, just as no women sat at the table in the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles when the provisions of the peace treaty were being drawn up. Women then were outsiders as they are today.

What is Virginia Woolf's suggestion, in *Three Guineas*, for her Society of Outsiders? It is mainly this: In the event of war, the women would refuse to make munitions or nurse the wounded; they would not fight with arms; they would do nothing at all to help on the war; they would not encourage their husbands or brothers to fight but would show a

complete indifference. The psychological effect of this indifference, she claims, would be tremendous. "The Outsider will make it her duty, not merely to base her indifference on instinct, but upon reason."

But, even though the Society of Outsiders that Virginia Woolf contemplates is composed of a special class of women — those whom she calls educated men's daughters (and she is thinking particularly of England) — what she proposes for them seems to me an absolute psychological impossibility in any country. For, apart from the fact that nonco-operation has been shown to be an ineffective instrument and indifference a negative one, it is an impossibility, after a war starts, for any considerable antiwar group to hold together, especially if the weapons of this group are merely negative. In time of war, governments are able to deal with recalcitrant groups in a manner to intimidate all but the truly inspired, the truly heroic spirits. Virginia Woolf does not take into account that overwhelming force, mass psychology, the epidemic-spreading power of passion-obsessed minds. The idea of nonco-operation in a war is fine in theory, but in practice it never works out on a large enough scale to be effective.

But her investing women with the status of "outsiders" has immense possibilities in other directions. It has happened over and over again in history that the outsider has at moments an extraordinary power of dominating the people inside; somebody from another tradition, another race, another faith can put over his idea on whole populations. Napoleon, the Corsican, dominated France; Disraeli, a Jew, made England conscious of her empire; the founder of a religion in Palestine dominated the whole world.

All the European dictators at the moment are, in fact, outsiders — not only in race, as some of them actually are, but in that they belong to no ruling group and have no ruling training; they suddenly, as it were, found a place for themselves. A great deal of their magnetizing power comes from the fact that they have not the prepossessions of long established rulers. They have had ideas based on another outlook on the world. If it is possible for whole countries of snobs and courtiers accustomed to genuflect before the Romanoffs, the Hohenzollerns, the Hapsburgs, the Savoy,

and the Sultans to accept as dictators house painters, stonemasons, and other workmen, it might be possible for high and mighty statesmen to accept the intervention of some women and their ideas in an effort to make the world less sterile than it is now and break up those abstractions that make for wars. Men have not despised women or kept them out of affairs more than the ruling classes of 25 years ago despised the Hitlers, the Stalins, the Mussolinis who now have the fate of the world in their hands or more than the ruling class in Turkey or China despised the Albanian Kemal Pasha or the Cantonese soldier, Chiang Kai-Shek.

THE WORLD WE WANT

DOROTHY THOMPSON, in that large-minded consideration of current *isms* and *ists* which she has entitled her *Political Guide*, has a chapter called "The World and Women," in which she makes the notable remark that if there is to be a revival in the world of the truly liberal spirit it will come through the influence of women. Her whole conception of the world human beings want to live in —

a warm world, a kind world, a human world . . . a world in which we will have such things as contentment, freedom, personal pride, opportunity for self-development, love, affection, and spiritual purpose

— is a woman's conception, a conception that will eventually have to be represented in every council chamber. She says truly:

Whatever new programmes or governmental system fails to assist these very simple human desires is a ghastly failure. . . . What every woman who is conscious and sensitive knows, and she may know it even if she is not conscious, feeling it in her bones is that, in the America of today as elsewhere in the world there is a sterility of human relations in the family, in the state, an atomization, loneliness, frustration, lack of warmth and juice, hatred, cleavage, shrillness, mechanicalness, heading towards new disciplines which will not be self-imposed but coerced.

One can recognize the truth of this without being as much against disciplines, other than the self-imposed, as Miss Thompson is. Some countries and individuals would, under certain circumstances, disintegrate completely if disciplines were not proposed to them and perhaps even imposed on them. After a disastrous war like the last, the only salvation for some countries was an imposed discipline, just as, when a human being is about to disintegrate into madness, the only salvation for him is a discipline

imposed from without. The self-imposed discipline is possible for the strong and the normal, but in all abnormalities, in people or nations, there is the need of the director; and there have frequently been times in history when the dictator was the least of many evils.

But what these modern European political disciplines and dictatorships amount to and aim at is explained in this *Political Guide* by a woman who owes allegiance to none of them but is herself an ardent adherent of liberalism. What Miss Thompson believes in firmly is the American Constitution, and her chapter, "Concerning Our Beginnings," is an inspiring profession of faith in the Constitution and the men who made it. These were men, as she says, of exceptional mental capacity and deep culture. The dictators of the modern European states are all proletarians — which may be a good thing — but they are also men without enough mental training, without enough spiritual enrichment, without enough culture to save them from perpetrating brutalities.

THE REFUGEE PROBLEM

THE SAME BROAD GRASP of contemporary political happenings is shown in Miss Thompson's *Refugees*, in which she deals with the gravest and most pressing problem of our times, the problem of how to deal with the thousands of men and women who are being expelled from countries where they (and in most cases their forefathers) have spent all their lives. In this book a concrete scheme is proposed, by which the cost of the settlement of refugees could be met, and their start in life in another country more or less assured. One like myself, for whom finance is a mystery, cannot pronounce on its soundness. But the author is so well informed and obviously has gone into it all with so much of her heart and brain that I trust her to have produced a practical scheme.

Still there is a second problem connected with the refugees, a psychological one of serious import in Europe anyway. Countries to whom a large number of refugees flee get, after a while, an antirefugee sentiment. This at bottom has little to do with race prejudice, as those will realize who remember the gradual dislike that arose for Belgian refugees after the first sentimental emotions waned a little. The other side of this psychological question is that

the refugees themselves are not always conscious of the political embarrassments they can cause countries who receive them by propagandizing against the countries who have expelled them.

It is the business of all of us who want to comprehend what is happening in the world at the present time to make ourselves familiar with these brief books of Dorothy Thompson's.

THE INIMICAL MALE

DOROTHY THOMPSON and Virginia Woolf are two of the outstanding personages of our time in their own lines, the one as a political publicist, the other as a woman of letters — a novelist, essayist, and scholar. Each knows her job thoroughly; each has an international reputation.

Virginia Woolf has evolved a technique of her own in the novel. She is modern in her methods, while her style is traditional: it is in that urbane, easy, intellectually sophisticated, Addison-Jane Austin line of descent. She is at home in the English language as few other living writers are.

The traditional rhythms, the carefully chosen words in *Three Guineas* may conceal from the casual reader the revolutionary nature of the ideas in the epistles that form the book. The notes and references in the appendix are in themselves a history of the struggle of women for education and self-realization and the status of human beings. More than any deliberate satire, this appendix shows the fatuousness of the highly placed personages who out of one stupidity or another opposed this movement toward human freedom. Those women who now take a university training for granted, as a man does, would be astounded to know the efforts that had to be made to get it for them by the pioneers of women's education.

When Emily Davies asked the help of the brilliant essayist, Walter Bagehot, in founding Girton, she received this reply: "I assure you I am not an enemy of women; I am very favorable to their employment as laborers or in other menial capacity."

Previously, a famous bishop in England had put up as an objection to women's education the fear that it would lead the country back to Papistry.

When the old universities of Oxford and Cambridge did finally admit the students of

the women's colleges to their examinations, they refused to allow them to inscribe the letters B.A. or M.A. after their names.

Dublin University for a long time made a tidy sum by conferring degrees, for a consideration, on the women who were already entitled to them through having passed the Oxford and Cambridge examinations.

The opinions expressed in our day on the destiny of women may be partly owing to their lack of education, but consider this passage from the novelist, William Gerhardt:

Never have I yet committed the error of looking on women writers as serious fellow artists. I enjoy them rather as spiritual helpers who, endowed with a sensitive capacity for appreciation, may help the few of us afflicted with genius to bear our cross with good grace.

The answer to this is that there are no women artists who could regard Mr. Gerhardt seriously as a fellow artist, and, whatever cross he has to bear, it is not that of genius.

THE PROFESSIONAL VS. THE AMATEUR

AFTER VIRGINIA WOOLF and Dorothy Thompson, Vera Brittain, in her *Thrice a Stranger*, gives the impression that, expert enough writer and commentator as she is, she is fundamentally the intelligent and highly gifted amateur. She does not sense the difference between the important and the unimportant, between the significant and the less significant; and this ability is what really marks the difference between the amateur and the professional. She seems to have a conviction that anything that has happened to her or anything that she has done — a schedule for a day's work, the letters she indited to her family and friends (of which she seems to have kept copies), the letters she received from editors — is worth recording in a book. This naiveté may have a certain feminine charm, but, remembering all the books that are being daily launched on the world, she might have spared us the list of her lecture dates, of her visits and dinner parties, and of her instructions to the introducers of public figures.

Still, the first part of *Thrice a Stranger*, with her account of her reactions to life in an American university town as the wife of a visiting English instructor is very well worth reading; her account of the faculty life, the effect on the faculty wives of the meager salaries paid their husbands, the scarcity or ab-

sence of domestic help, is sympathetic and very revealing; written from the European feminist side, it throws a light on the lot of faculty wives in an American town, on the narrowness of their lives and their interests.

Vera Brittain with her busy feminism must have been more than a trifle disturbing in the university town where she was first a stranger in America. Her liking for this country increased with the sale of her books. "By their belief in me and my works," she writes of her publishers, "they created for me a new America of which I was slowly and incredulously becoming aware." This seems to be taking oneself and one's works a little too seriously.

THE CONQUEROR ARTIST

AFTER ALL THESE BOOKS dealing in one way or another with public affairs and in the manner of the impersonal and objective writer, it is to go into another world to read the *Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*. For what Yeats is concerned with is not external happenings — although he played a considerable part in his early manhood in Irish revolutionary politics and in later life has been a senator. The problem with which he is constantly occupied is the problem of artistic creation and with what goes with that problem — the problem of personal realization.

In a preface to one of the sections of this autobiography he writes of some of his friends:

They were artists and writers, and certain among them men of genius, and the life of a man of genius, because of his greater sincerity, is often an experiment that needs analysis and record.

Well, here the life of a man of genius is given its record; here are unfolded 60 years in the life of a great poet, of a man of thought; and here are the experiments that made up that life given analysis, generally a very subtle analysis. This is a book on a very high plane, the plane of an untrammelled intellect nurtured by painters and poets and men of thought, enlivened by passionate patriotic impulses, intensely curious about a side of life which may form the ground for one of the next advances of humanity — the psychic life which, under forms such as astrology, mediumship, apparitions, symbols to induce visions, and incantations, has been so important in the life of this man who has been so clear-sighted and has accomplished so much.

Reading this autobiography, made up of various short volumes of memoirs published from time to time in the last 25 years, we perceive now that the only other book to compare it with is Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Like Goethe's, Yeats's autobiography is informal; unlike Goethe's, it has no story interest; unlike Goethe's again, it has no romantic evocations of the women of a poet's youth. But both autobiographies are accounts of the intellectual development and integration of poets who are also deeply concerned with abstract problems.

The conclusion that dominates the whole of the book is that culture as defined by Walter Pater and Cardinal Newman, the "wise re-

ceptivity" of Newman, the "hard and gem-like flame" of Peter, is too passive, too feminine. He turns from this to the culture of the Renaissance, "founded not on self-knowledge, but on knowledge of some other self, Christ or Caesar, not on delicate sincerity, but on imitative energy." Yeats's own doctrine of Masks is bound up with this idea of "imitative energy."

It is a cause for rejoicing that a book like this, with its difficult ideal of self-realization, has been published in our day when so much that is offered us is the facile work of people who have barely emerged from rawness. The writer of this autobiography is one of those great men who are not only artists but prophets and adepts, one of the few left us.

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for *Your Flaming Blood Is Smouldering in Our Veins*

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