

THE WOMAN-ARTIST

BY MARY M. COLUM

THOUGH we are all slaves to life — in human bondage — women in the very nature of things are more enslaved than men, and in any discussion of the woman-artist it is just as well to begin by accepting this condition. Therefore, in this article I am going to pass over the much-publicized handicap of being obliged to spend the best hours of the morning in buying the family food, washing the baby, driving husband to the station, or taking clothes to the cleaners. This handicap, though real, is not insurmountable for any woman who has enough urge to production. Such employments, anyway, are likely to be most demanding in the twenties or early thirties, and at this stage of the world's history anything that can aid in holding back artistic production until the would-be producer has reached maturity and attained to some depth of experience is more likely to be beneficial than the reverse.

The initial problem before the woman-artist is the one that faces any potential artist — that is, it is the same for both men and women. This problem is: how is anyone to know that he or she is an artist at all and not just a person with an artistic temperament — one capable of understanding an art. For, to repeat a sentence in a previous article, art is the possession of two kinds of people — those who produce it and those who understand it. How is the woman to know that she is a creative artist — how is she to know whether she has enough talent to take chances in devoting herself to work which may take her away from more materially rewarding labor or from the important business of ministering to other people? My own solutions of these matters may seem a trifle Philistine or at least rather pragmatic, but in their favor I will say that they are based on a fair experience of art and life and a considerable experience of artists.

There are two fairly sound ways in which an

individual may estimate his own talent, and, as they are both external to the artist, they are not final. Can one produce work of exciting interest for even a small number of understanding people who are neither relatives nor friends nor people personally interested in admiring one's performances? Is the work produced of such interest to these people that they look forward to seeing it or reading it or hearing it with such anticipation that they make a demand on one to produce it? In short, has the artist or would-be artist, after a fair practice of her art, acquired an audience? If she has not, there are compelling reasons for believing that the gods have called her to be an appreciator rather than a producer.

For no one, or almost no one (there are odd, curious exceptions), can continue to produce without an audience. Generally speaking, there is no such thing, in spite of modern, eccentric theories, as an artist who does not desire an audience. People who say they express but do not wish to communicate are probably deceiving themselves or posing; if not, they are unbalanced or are almost demi-gods. The greatest genius ever born, placed in a position where he could not have an audience of some kind, would not continue producing, for art is meant to communicate, that is, to pass something on to somebody. The importance of audience to artist is really tremendous, and, the higher the demands of the audience, the better the work produced; audience and artist are interdependent.

The second way of estimating one's talent, and this to some extent is assumed in the first, is by discovering if the would-be artist can get any material reward for what he produces. Keats, it will be remembered, said in effect that one good reason for working at an art was to make money by it. Such return would certainly contain the proof that the artist had an

audience, even though the art Keats practiced, poetry, in any place brings very little gain.

An art may be honestly practiced for three reasons: the first two presuppose the practitioner to have marked talent or even genius. First, as a means of livelihood. Secondly, to make the thing for its own sake and for an audience, fit though few, which can give the author that good report, that fame, which was for Milton the spur "which the clear spirit doth raise to scorn delights and live laborious days." Lastly, an art can be reasonably practiced as an accomplishment, as our grandmothers played the piano or painted in water colors or wove tapestries. While the practicing of an art as an accomplishment is one of the most entertaining ways of giving pleasure or of sharpening one's own mind for the understanding of works of genius, the practitioners of art as an accomplishment are not, properly speaking, artists; they belong to the audience — that is, they belong to one of the two classes of people for whom art is a possession.

These amateurs of art, whose value to art is so great, have got out of hand in our day, owing to the hazy state of criticism and the mania for publicity, and one can say that three fourths of the poetry published and many of the short stories and novels represent nothing more than a pleasing accomplishment on the part of their authors, and should never have been allowed the franchise of publication. For it can never be said often enough that there are only two real reasons why a publisher should launch a work: one, that it brings him and the author prestige, whether it sells or not — the prestige given by a public which knows what art is; the other, that it brings him and the author a money return, that it sells. Professional artists are of two kinds only — those who gain fame and those who gain money — and, of course, it often happens that these are not separated; all the rest are amateurs and belong to a different class altogether.

II

AS REGARDS the woman-artist, the next problem is a special one. Can she count on the necessary energy to devote to the work? For an art demands an enormous energy of a curiously dynamic, one might almost say elemental, kind, and not exactly physical, though one

must postulate that it in some measure depends on physical resources or at least on passable health. It is of the kind which psychologists like Jung and Janet call psychic energy and which, when at a high degree of activity, endows its possessor with that long patience or long impatience which we term genius. While most people in their youth have certainly a quantum of such energy, it seems to be only men and women of genius who have it in such abundance that it gives them a curious irradiation which makes them more alive than other people, more in communication either with life or with some region beyond. It is a sort of energy of which by necessity a woman needs more than a man, through the very fact that she is more deeply enslaved to the race. Yet all history seems to show that she by nature possesses less of it or that what she possesses very rarely glows with that white heat out of which great achievement in the arts or perhaps great achievement of any kind comes.

Genius, it has often been said, knows no sex; it is noteworthy, anyhow, that it seems to endow its possessor with the mental and emotional attributes of both sexes, while at the same time men and women of real genius have generally in a superlative degree the special attributes traditionally said to belong to their own. Men who have written the tenderest lyrics have been hard and tough fighters and leaders of rough and rebellious men, and women who have shown powerfully virile qualities in an art have had at the same time all the softness and tenderness and the love for personal adornment associated with their sex.

But, with all that can be said for genius having no sex, the fact remains that the number of women who have excelled in any art is so small that almost all that has ever been accomplished by them could be sunk out of sight and the world of art would be barely a fraction of a degree the poorer for the loss. The usual reason given in explanation of this is that the physical energy and time of women is so given up to the race that they have little left over to enable them to excel in other pursuits. However, it is in the very pursuits that require time and physical energy that they have excelled: they have been successful in enormously long novels, in elaborate works of scholarship, in patient scientific investigation, in long airplane

flights, and, as the records increasingly show, in feats requiring much physical endurance. But in the sort of work that requires neither time nor physical energy nor long preparation but simply a swift, telling flight of the mind; a winged, eagle thought; an ardor of the imagination, they have too rarely excelled, too rarely come anywhere near men's achievements. The sublimest lyric that has ever been produced could have been written on the back of an envelope while rocking the baby, if the writer had sufficient intensity of passion or imagination; it would not take either time, extended concentration, or long preparation, but only an ardor of the heart and an ardor of the brain clicking together for one mastering moment, so that the maker lost herself in a general feeling of humanity.

It is in this very type of lyrical flight that women have been notably ineffectual. The great love lyrics, the great lyrics of every kind, even the best cradle songs have been made by men. The love lyrics made by women have been too often on the pattern of Christina Rossetti's:

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree.
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

This does not express love at all but merely that simple, self-pitying egotism which is the most evident mood in the work of so many women poets: sometimes it is alarming in its elemental and sentimental self-centeredness, yet this is the sort of stuff men have loved women for writing.

Another variety of self-centeredness can be found in the work of the late Madame de Noailles, who, nevertheless, has to be included among the dozen best women-poets. A charming, babbling, child-like vanity, as of one inspired only while gazing into her own mirror, is added to the self-centeredness. These are some lines from a representative poem of hers which is also one of her best.

Mes livres je les fis pour vous, ô jeunes hommes,
Et j'ai laissé dedans,
Comme font les enfants qui mordent dans des
pommes,
La marque de mes dents. . . .

Je vous laisse, dans l'ombre amère de ce livre,
Mon regard et mon front,
Et mon âme toujours ardente et toujours ivre
Où vos mains traîneront.

Je vous laisse le clair soleil de mon visage,
Ses millions de rais,
Et mon cœur faible et doux, qui eut tant de courage
Pour ce qu'il désirait.

Je vous laisse mon cœur et toute son histoire,
Et sa douceur de lin,
Et l'aube de ma joue, et la nuit bleue et noire
Dont mes cheveux sont pleins.

My books, I have made them for you, o young men, and I have left therein, as children do who bite into apples, the mark of my teeth. . . . I leave in the bitter shadow of this book my expression and my countenance, my soul ever ardent and ever inebriated where your hands will linger [on the page]. I leave you the clear sun of my face, its million rays, and my heart weak and gentle, which had so much courage for what it desired. I leave you my heart and all its history, and its softness of flax, and the dawn of my cheek, and the blue and black night of which my hair is full.

I do not say that this is not good enough poetry of a kind; it is pleasing, charming, pathetic, and capable of arousing yearning emotions. It and the one of Christina Rossetti's quoted will certainly live for a while: they are by two out of the dozen or so best women-poets in the whole history of literature, yet they are on a totally different plane, a lower plane, from the lyrics written by men and dealing with like subjects. If one compares Christina Rossetti's, which is a characteristic woman's love poem, with that characteristic man's poem, Drayton's "Come let us kiss and part," we will immediately see wherein lies the difference. The larger, more universal spirit is the man's. The love with which these poems deal, except in one of its constituents, physical passion, is, of course, a rare enough experience of humanity—so rare that the old-fashioned strictures against reading novels glorifying romantic love had certainly a practical point, for the novels were glorifying an experience which could be only a dream, never a reality, to most of their readers.

But love on its highest plane seems to have been experienced by all the men who have written of it and hardly at all by the women. One contemporary writer, however, has been one of these rare exceptions among women. I am referring to the late Elinor Wylie whose love poetry written at the maturity of her powers, just be-

fore her death, makes that of most other women-poets seem the expression of an immature, superficial response. Taking even lonely lines from separate poems, we find the unmistakable winged thought, an almost intolerable ecstasy of inspiration that makes her stand as the equal of any man-poet among her contemporaries.

Mortality has wearied us that wear it,
And they are wiser creatures who have shunned
This miry world, this slough of man's despond,
To fortify the skies we shall inherit. . . .

"At the little noise our death will make
No red deer need stand still. . . ."

And let us creep into the smallest room
That any hunted exile has desired
For him and for his love when he was tired. . . .

III

THE AUTHOR of such lines was one of the rare spirits among women-writers who was an artist as were the great men-artists; she could get completely out of herself, outside all vanity and self-centeredness, to a universal personality in her mind that made her creative personality something other and beyond her every-day one. For in spite of what so profound a critic as Saint-Beuve has said about the identity of the author and his work, of his life and his product, there is in nearly every case a vast difference between an author's creative personality and that every-day personality which eats, sleeps, and shows itself to the world. It is just this inability to get beyond the every-day personality and its subjectiveness that has been the trouble with so many women-writers. What they experience in their senses and emotions too often remains on that plane, even in highly gifted women, and does not become transferred to the intellect or transformed by the intellect.

And perhaps this is the basis for the assumption, on the part of many philosophers, of the inferiority of the minds of women, and why Schopenhauer, in his notorious essay on women, said, "They never got beyond the subjective point," and they were "incapable of purely objective interest in anything," and, though so many of them cultivated drawing and painting, "they have not a single great painting to boast of, because they are deficient in that objectivity of mind which is so directly indispensable in

painting." While we all know that this particular essay came out of that very private-mindedness for which Schopenhauer blamed women, yet some of his criticism is sound, and several of the present-day psychologists have come to like conclusions when they state that women rarely show any power of "object love."

By objectivity of mind is meant—in literature, anyhow—a power of passing experience through the intellect so that it becomes depersonalized and acquires at least a quantum of universality. It was this power which made Sappho so great a poet, for even in the remnants that are left of her we can see why the ruins of her works have survived the ruins of Greece, may survive even the ruins of Europe, as Catullus and Virgil have survived the ruins of Rome. The lack of this power is one of the serious disabilities which make most women-writers and artists second- or third-rate in comparison with men. If one were sure that it was a quality inherently incapable of attainment by women as a sex, one might be less impatient with it, but the fact seems to be that the developing of this objectivity demands a struggle with themselves and with circumstances which they do not care to face. There is reason to think even that they imagine themselves more charming without it, though I would back in charm of all kinds any sincere woman-artist against any professional charmer that ever was.

But that objectivity of mind is attainable by them has been shown in the past by several women and is shown to-day by some outstanding figures. A woman like Sigrid Undset shows it in all her work, especially in her epic novels, novels which are on a level at least with those of the highly praised Thomas Mann or of any contemporary male novelist, leaving out the great innovators like Joyce and Proust. Perhaps, if women realized how significant a part it is of the creative personality, they would make more of an effort to achieve it. Men who in their every-day life are creatures of self-centeredness and private-mindedness, as we know many artists are, become, once the study door closes on them and the creative personality begins to function, creatures of the purest disinterestedness and the purest objectivity of mind.

My own belief about this salient power of

objectivity and the ability to put aside the every-day personality for the creative personality is that both powers depend upon a state of intellectual and psychological freedom. Persons in a condition of personal submission to others cannot produce original, creative work; their mental, emotional, and psychological life becomes so shackled that it functions only at such low pressure that creative work is difficult or impossible. This is not true only of women, whose age-long submission is one of the facts of history, a state to which they have been conditioned early in life and from which modern education is slowly freeing them; it is true also of men. Men have quite as rarely as women produced creative work of any value in a state of personal submission to others; this is true not only of those in a state of voluntary submission to superiors: a lackey could not have described the world of lackeys which is *Gil Blas* — it took a liberated man to do it. Very little intellectual and artistic work has come out of barracks or monasteries, where men live in a state of obedience and submission to superiors and perform fixed, routine duties. This, though we know that men of the highest natural ability have at all times entered monasteries and that the monastic life has had a singular attraction for artistic and contemplative types. The creative faculty was sacri-

ficed in the submission of their personalities, or became narrowed to the performance of duties in the immediate surroundings; the Carmelite John of the Cross and the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins are surprising exceptions.

It is a curious fact that it is personal submission rather than political slavery which dulls creative power or destroys the desire to exercise it. Great art has appeared under terrible political tyranny: both Dante and Dostoevski suffered tortures under it; both were harassed and banished — Dostoevski being condemned to death and rescued at the last moment from a firing squad to be banished to Siberia. Yet these experiences seem to have heightened rather than dulled their creative faculties. Too much, it seems to me, is made of the power of political dictatorships to cramp the functioning of the mind. In recent history two of the great creative periods were the last fifty years of the czarist tyranny in Russia and the last thirty years of the English domination of Ireland. It is the intimate, the immediate enslavement by persons or things that destroys, that eats away the power to attain a life in the mind, and it is this that a woman must strive against if she is to become a real artist. Great artists do not always have the conventional virtues, but they all attain to that gift of the enfranchised spirit — *grandeur d'âme*.

Mrs. Colum has written
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FATHER DIVINE IS GOD

BY LIONEL LEVICK

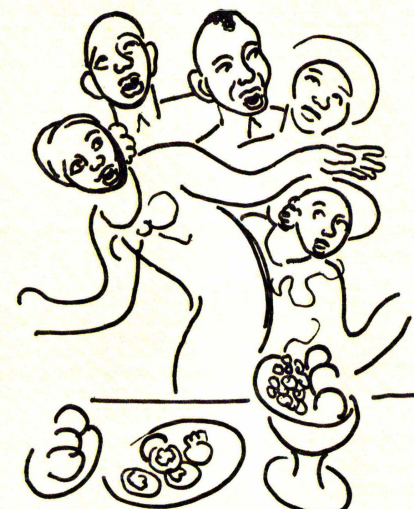
FATHER DIVINE is four feet, six inches tall, bald, has a dark yellow skin and a typically Negro skull, and his preaching manner is more plodding than magnetic. Five years ago he ran a small employment agency on Long Island. To-day he is God incarnate to some millions of people: not God symbolically but God in the flesh. His followers are not all Negroes; more astounding than the scope of his appeal to his own race, with its perpetual longing for a leader, is the extent to which white men and women give him their allegiance. In many states he has established homes and refuges, religious houses in old factories and such places, each of which is called a "Kingdom." In them, white people share quarters with blacks, and whites sit at the meals, called banquets, which are served daily; some come to be fed physically and some spiritually. Whites come on pilgrimage, singly and in limousines or in parties of thirty or forty, from as far away as the Pacific Coast, to receive the message from his own lips in Harlem.

They come to no new creed, ritual, or discipline, but to a simple, reiterated assertion of peace and plenty at hand for the just. They come to be healed of ills which other generations have not known. Father Divine's movement began in 1929 and has grown with the depression. In a smitten world his password is

"Peace!" To the hungry he interprets the Garden of Eden as the Garden of Eating, and the pun becomes celestial. His church is summarized as a free form of worship directed by

the spirit, and he himself describes his principle as "faith in the ever-presence of God." He says, "A person can attune himself to the life of Christ as one may tune a radio to the waves that are broadcast from a studio." While he does not claim deity, he does not deny the attribution, saying merely, "I teach that God has the right to manifest Himself through any person or thing He may choose."

His doctrines seem those of many others, and his meetings run close to the revival type, but this man gives food and shelter and passes no collection plate. His believers declare that in the morning they find money in their purses which was not there the night before. He tells them that if they follow his light all the cares of this world will fall from them, that they will be provided for and live forever; and many leave wife or husband or child to follow, for his teaching is ascetic. The bridegroom of a year leaves his wife and child, saying, "We are all brothers and sisters." White and black they come, from a world riddled with doubt and despair, to accept the assurance he propounds in interminable sermons. Divine is aware of this motive; he has said, "So many people are



Drawings by Mary Cecil Allen