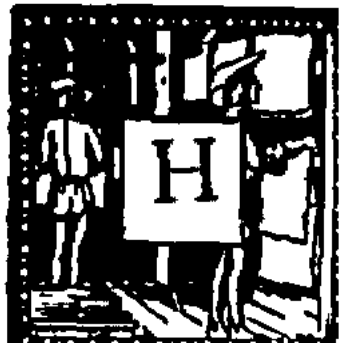
THE FUNCTION OF FICTION AND SOME RECENT NOVELS



ITHERTO the modern novel, as the youngest type of creative literature, has been accorded a certain splendid freedom, without which nothing, either in the world of letters or of life, can ever fully accomplish its natural evolution. Now, however, that fiction is being taken more and more seriously, there is a growing tendency not merely to formulate the principles of technique as they have been practised by the great novelists of the past—a thing which in itself is eminently worth the doing—but also to dogmatise about the novel of the future; to insist that the novelist has a right to do certain things and has not the right to do certain others; in short, to crystallise the forms of fiction, just as the epic and the lyric, the sonnet and the rondeau have been crystallised in the past. Each college professor who undertakes to teach a class of sophomores the elements of the short story, each literary agent who studies the requirements of various popular magazines, and advises young authors not to be too original, each professional reader who suggests that a novel be accepted on

condition that the end shall be rewritten according to a prescribed formula, each reviewer who censures a good story because it departs from the practice of Balzac or Thackeray or Stevenson—each and all of these are doing their little share in robbing the modern novel of its elasticity of form. Yet it is precisely its elasticity of form that has given the novel an inestimable advantage over the other branches of literature. It is only the novel that can meet the needs of serious thinkers and of those who do not wish to think at all; that is equally adapted to express the profoundest depths of human tragedy or the light froth that floats upon the surface of life. It is this very fact that the novel is still essentially in its transition period that gives it its greatest interest, not merely for to-day, but for the future. And for this reason it is premature to ask, or at least to attempt to answer, as so many critics have attempted, just what are the true and proper functions of modern fiction.

At present there are almost as many different answers to the question as there are persons who venture to ask it. To Zola, the one supreme function of fiction is to tell the truth about nature and humanity; to Anatole France, a scarcely less important function is to lie magnificently, because, he claims, there is in every one of us a deep-seated need at times of being lied to. To at least one-half of both makers and readers of modern fiction the one indispensable quality is that it shall entertain. To a large and powerful minority the true function of the novel is not so much to entertain as to instruct. Before these opposing views can be harmonised, the vexed questions of realism and romance, of the problem novel, of a dozen other debatable grounds in fiction, must be reconciled and settled. And this would be an endless pity, because it is from the very clash and opposition of the different schools that the modern novel owes its strength and its variety. It was only through the sharp reaction from the romantic school that we discovered what might be done by naturalism; it was only through the recoil from the brutal excesses of the realists that the finer methods of the psychologue were born. It is, of course, quite possible that a day will come when a wise eclecticism will have decided in just what proportions the real and the ideal, the external verity and the introspective analysis shall be blended, in order to make a perfect moving-picture of life in words. But whatever the novel of the future may or may not become, it is to be sincerely hoped that the result will be brought about by the simple working of the laws of natural selection and not by the artificial influence of even the best-intentioned critics.

There is, of course, much sound and profitable advice that may be given to the young novelist—and not infrequently to the veteran novelist as well—but the best of all advice is to remind them often that there is no principle of literary technique which may not sometimes wisely be disregarded, providing the author or his theme or both are big enough to justify such disregard. It is easy to imagine, were Scott or Thackeray or Dickens to-day just beginning their career, what sort of advice they would each receive from well-meaning critics—how the Waverley novels would be pruned to nearly half their bulk, because it "took too long to get into the story," and there was too much description in proportion to the dialogue; how Thackeray would be reminded, over and over again, that the strictly objective method is by far the best art, and that he must stop his lamentable habit of obtruding his own personality and indulging in intimate confidences with the reader; and how Dickens would be censured not merely for his verboseness, but more especially for the undisciplined vein of exaggeration that so often gives his work the effect of caricature. And yet it needs no argument to prove that the great majority who read and value Dickens and Thackeray and Scott to-day do so because they are precisely what they are rather than something they might have been. Indeed, in the case of Thackeray, the present generation loves him, not merely in spite of his deliberate intrusion, his pose as the Showman of his Puppets, but very largely because of it. And while the gain in technique in the modern novel is undeniably great, and the general standard of even the cheap, sensational fiction is in structure substantially higher than it was a generation ago,

yet we have to admit that could these principles have been formulated and enforced a half century earlier, something precious and irreparable would have been lost from the older novelists of recognised greatness.

Of course, to-day it would be no longer possible to write with the naïve disregard of technical rules that pervades Rabelais and Cervantes, and in lesser degree even Fielding and Smollett. We have been too carefully educated to the possibilities of faultless construction by Hardy, Meredith and Henry James in England, by Flaubert and Maupassant in France, ever again to revert to the amorphous looseness of the pioneers in fiction. And yet, as a price for this greater refinement, we cannot fail to be conscious that a certain rough and sturdy vigour has been sacrificed. In a certain sense the modern novelist is like the breeder of thoroughbreds, who says to himself: "The one proper function of the horse is to trot in something less than 2.10," and who systematically strives to eliminate from the horse all the qualities with which nature has painstakingly endowed him, excepting those adapted to the function of speed. The modern novel of the highest type is essentially a thoroughbred novel, a wonderful creation of its kind, showing the marks of its pedigree in every page. You can trace its descent unerringly; you can see just what it owes to the old robust English novelists, and just where the imported strain of Zola, Tolstoi, Ibsen, has further modified it. Yet highly developed as it is, one wonders sometimes whether this development has not in a measure been at the cost of vitality—whether, in short, any of our twentieth-century fiction will be able to defy the passage of the centuries like the stories of bygone generations, written in a spirit of blithe irresponsibility, before the art had time to grow self-conscious. It has carefully been pointed out by modern scholarship that only a negligible proportion of the tales of Boccaccio obey the rules of the short story; yet this fact did not prevent their enjoyment by many a generation before Boccaccio gathered them together and gave them their final polish—indeed, just how old they are, how many of them are of Tuscan origin, how many he himself invented, how many go straight back to the old Milesian tales, are questions no one to-day can answer. And centuries before Boccaccio there was Apuleius, another jovial soul of Rabelaisian humour, a liar of such magnificent proportions that Anatole France once says of him: "I admit that Apuleius is my secret sin!" There are those of us who share this affection for Apuleius and who every now and then revert to him as we revert to Rabelais and Cervantes, and yet Apuleius obviously never dreamed that there was such a thing as the technique of the novel, but wrote simply because he had seen much of life and loved it greatly.

Regarding, then, this whole question of the function of the modern novel, the important thought to keep in mind is that, while as a literary form fiction is steadily moving forward toward a goal that at present is still too remote to be more than dimly seen, there is no need to trouble ourselves greatly about either its theoretical or its actual function. It is sufficient to judge each separate volume on its own individual merits. If it is a book written solely to amuse and worthily fulfils its purpose, then it is eminently a good book—after its kind. If it is what Mr. Crawford has called "that odious thing, a purpose novel," and also accomplishes its mission—in the triumphant way of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—then it also is a good book, after its kind. And while we must always pay to careful technique the tribute that is due to art for art's sake, we should never lose sight of the fact that sometimes certain other important qualities of fiction, character drawing, scenic description, subtle analysis of the emotions, are found at their best in books whose technique of construction is rudimentary.