NEW INTENTIONS IN THE NOVEL

BY JOSEPH WARREN BEACH

MR. SHERWOOD ANDERSON was ill-advised in choosing for his recent novel the title *Many Marriages*. It is chiefly in the title that he forgets that he is an artist and seems to make a bid for acceptance as a teacher. And surely anyone with a teaching like this would be much wiser not to assume the didactic tone, but to rest his case on the truth, or still better the artistic intention, of his work. For it is hard to believe that the author of *The Triumph of the Egg*, the disciple of Chekov and Andreyeff, is not primarily moved by an artistic intention. The title of *Many Marriages* is simply a hold-over from the period of problem novels, the period in English fiction sufficiently suggested by Charles Reade's *Put Yourself in His Place* and Mrs. Canfield's *The Squirrel Cage*. And it is Mr. Anderson's own fault if the critics have taken him at his word and given their estimate of the doctrine instead of the art of his performance.

The time has come, in the art of fiction, for new terms, new definitions, to keep pace with the many new inventions. Literary history, in England and America, like political history, is always far behind the times. In France it is the other way round. History in Paris is prophecy: terms are invented and movements heralded and described before they ever materialize; and you will sometimes read the history of a school of art which never comes into being. English literature has not been so lacking in invention as the silence of criticism would imply. It has been as active as its sister arts. Years ago Mr. George Moore, writing of an earlier "revolution", the crusade in which he was himself a notable champion, referred to the way in which the several arts were keeping abreast. The movement, says one of his characters, "accomplishes nothing in music that it does not do in literature; nothing in literature that it does not do in painting." It was a question, then, of an art based, like modern thought, on

logic, the art of an age of science. Such was the "new æstheticism" of which they talk in *A Modern Lover*. But has not the scientific spirit in art—the spirit of George Eliot and Zola, the spirit of Brahms, of Manet and Renoir—largely given way in our times to another spirit, the spirit of sheer æsthetic intention? This is a protean spirit, expressing itself in many ways, and changing its form even as we undertake to fix it with a phrase. But there are several aspects roughly distinguishable in the bewildering throng of forms in which it shows itself.

I

The new spirit expresses itself, for one thing, in the sheer love of design. We see this in poetry in Amy Lowell and Carl Sandburg, as we see it in most post-impressionist painting, which is interested not so much in realistic imitation as in the arrangement of colours and planes of light in decorative patterns. Even in the novel there are signs of a languishing interest in realism and romance, the old categories, and a disposition to treat the stuff of life with some of the constructive freedom of a Gauguin or a Matisse.

Mr. Swinnerton is a story-teller given to free experimentation in subject and method, and he has written at least one book that appeals before all else to the love of design. The effectiveness of *Nocturne* is not in the truth of its psychology or of the study of dingy London life;—there is just truth enough for plausibility and illusion;—it is in the way Jenny Blanchard's romance shines forth upon the background of the Blanchard menage, centering in the dreary senile Pa Blanchard, the way in which her chance nocturnal venture is set in contrast to the safe and commonplace romance of Alf and Emmy. The drawing is vigorous; the points of etched brightness stand out strange and wistful from the rich surrounding darkness. It is a good picture—who wants to put any irrelevant question as to its realism? This is work obviously not done on the principles of Flaubert and the Goncourts; still less congenial is it to the ideal of Stevenson. What could the genius of Stevenson have to say to Pa Blanchard and his beer, or to Emmy and her unromantic betrayal of her sister?

A more conscious and consistent practitioner of this art is one of our own house. Mr. Hergesheimer seems to have been aware from the beginning of his talent for decoration. And his short stories are as obviously designed in this spirit as his novels. But the most stunning of Mr. Hergesheimer's arrangements are to be found in his novels *Java Head* and *The Three Black Pennys*—especially in the former. In *The Three Black Pennys* he has a fine inspiration, and he displays his usual scholarship and gusto in setting in a row the three periods and the three stages of culture, and woven through them the mystic thread of heredity. Never outside the films of D. H. Griffith has American historical fiction given us such shivers of delight in costume and domestic setting, in the styles and æsthetic passions of bygone times. What can be more delicious than the memories of Howat Penny dreaming over his album of opera programmes of '83 and '84: Adelina Patti drawn in triumph to her hotel with men in evening dress between the shafts for horses? One part is linked to another, in this epic of iron, by the beating hammer of Myrtle Forge and the lurid fires of Shadrach Furnace and Harrisburg. And one generation of Pennys is bound to another by the mysterious associations of ancestral homes and of peculiar tastes and sensations cropping out in times far apart. Mariana Jannan is vaguely irritated by James Polder's taste for orange juice and brandy, as Jasper Penny had been by the similar taste of Essie Schofield. The last Howat when he is dying sees the same "pattern of flying geese" wavering across the tranquil evening sky that the first Howat saw on the day of the raccoon hunt with which the history begins. Such is for this weaver of tales the fascination of recurring themes: he must put before us on the last page the same symbolic pattern which he had drawn upon the first.

Unfortunately Mr. Hergesheimer makes the mistake of trying to have his fine artistic theme of the black Pennys serve also as a scientific thesis, suggesting some confused theory of degeneration through abuse of strength. There is no such confusion in design and no such scientific pretentiousness to spoil the beauty of Mr. Hergesheimer's invention in *Java Head.* So far is he here from pretending to sound the deeps of psychology that he gives

no more than two chapters to the consciousness of the leading man of the story, and not more than a single chapter to any other character. This same method rules out the possibility of a strongly dramatic effect. The greatest potentialities of drama center about Taou Yuen, the gorgeous Manchu lady so amazingly set down among the staid parochial notabilities of Salem. But this situation is picturesque rather than strictly dramatic. The dramatic implications are but slightly developed: Taou Yuen's personal problem comes up and is settled within a single chapter; and most of this is interior drama, involving, too, a psychology and philosophy so unfamiliar to us as to generate little intensity of feeling. In the last chapter the author deliberately turns away from drama by centering attention upon Roger Brevard, a slight character in what may be called the under-plot. But the very things that preclude drama are what is called for in this kind of picture, or decorative arrangement in colours. Taou Yuen is the central feature, or high light, of the composition, about which are ranged Gerrit, the honest seaman, Edward Dunsack, the Occidental man turned yellow by contagion of the Orient, and a perfect prism of pure Salem types. It is a design in which many distinct bits of graded or contrasting colour are set close together with the boldness of some Cubist study. The great technical feature of this book is the presentation from the points of view of nine different persons, who succeed one another in successive chapters as the changing mirrors in which the action is reflected. These characters are not all of the first importance to the story, and they are of all different sorts: from the girlish innocence of Laurel, proud of being too grown-up for pantalettes but all absorbed in childish things, to Edward Dunsack, treacherous and corrupt and crazed with opium; not to mention the intenser colours of Gerrit, Quixotic man of the sea, and Taou Yuen, lonely and superior, dressed out in high Confucian wisdom as in stiff satins and embroideries. Each one of these characters, major and minor, gives the dominant note of colour to his chapter; and the whole is like a gorgeous and exquisite fan with many-coloured leaves spread wide.

The devotees of romance may complain of the lack of story, or rather the way in which the author turns his back upon the story.

The solemn votaries of realism may grumble over the sketchiness of the psychology, its mythical fantasticality. But all such criticism is beside the mark if Mr. Hergesheimer has done something "different" enough to escape altogether the old tiresome categories. It may turn out that he has invented a new genre, congenial to the spirit of his day, the Novel as Decoration.

II

In calling any work of art a decoration one does suggest, perhaps, a certain want of depth, of high seriousness in conception. And Mr. Hergesheimer seems himself to have realised that his work might be open to the imputation of being pretty or charming rather than deep and significant. And he has undertaken, in the later work of *Cytherea* and *The Bright Shawl*, to supply that element of profundity. He has supplied it by a choice of themes suggestive of the idealistic romance of Mr. Conrad. The later work of Mr. Hergesheimer suggests particularly *The Arrow of Gold* by the ideal representative character of the motives, call them sentiments or passions, that animate the leading persons of the story.

The Arrow of Gold is the most clearly defined case of a type of romance of which Conrad is a great master if not the inventor, and which it is an amusing task to try to define. The traditional genres of English fiction are realism, a study of society in its diurnal and daylight phases, and romance, a story of adventure in times and places suitable to heroism and fine words. Psychological analysis we associate with the daylight studiousness of science, and we attribute it to the realists. But when we find it pursued with a kind of holy passion to the exclusion of incident, manners, and what ordinarily passes for character, as in the later work of Henry James, we are puzzled to know what school to refer it to. And when the method of James is applied in *Lord Jim* to the commander of the Patna and the beneficent ruler of Patusan, or to the romantic heroes of *Victory* and *Rescue*, we realise that the exploration of the soul may be as congenial to romance as to the most anxious and responsible of realism.

Romance in Conrad has undergone a sea change into some-

thing akin to poetry. Ordinary romance is after all, in the novel, a prosy matter. The business of the ironclad knight was, we may suppose, the winning of battles and ladies. But in this transcendental romance we are concerned not with the practical business of chivalrous heroes so much as with the pursuit of some abstract romantic ideal suitable to the poets of the Renaissance or of the "Romantic Movement"—something to remind us of *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion.* Monsieur George, in *The Arrow of Gold,* had no business with the Legitimist revolt of Don Carlos; and still less did he have any business mooning over Doña Rita. And his love for Doña Rita was anything but the ordinary love of the heroes of prose romance—that practical determination to possess himself of a princess in a tower. It was a Platonic vision of abstract beauty, a Shelleyan nympholepsy. She was no woman but Woman. She was not even Woman in the abstract as conceived by classic poets. "She was That which is to be Contemplated to all Infinity." And the realization of her infinite nature induced in the hero a most unheroic mood of contemplative quietude. "I had never tasted such perfect quietness before. It was not of this earth. I had gone far beyond. (Like Shelley following Keats into "the Abode where the Eternal are".) It was as if I had reached the ultimate wisdom beyond all dreams and all passion." She was for him an object of poetic contemplation, a symbolic representation of abstract beauty. "I cared for nothing but that sublimely æsthetic impression. It summed up all life, all joy, all poetry." She was even, he feared, a creation of his own mind, a purely ideal creature. "Since I came into this room you have done nothing to destroy my conviction of your unreality apart from myself."

It is thus that Mr. Conrad has introduced a vein of romantic poetry into the novel, and has produced a genre quite distinct from the romance of Scott and Dumas and Stevenson. It goes without saying that he makes no effort to picture the time of love-making of Doña Rita and Monsieur George; that is not within any imaginable reach of prose writing, but must be left to the untrammeled imagination of the poet, as in *Epipsychidion.* And the inevitable conclusion of that love is wholly uncongenial

to the spirit of what we may call practical romance. "You know," says the wise Mills to his friend George, "that this is not a world for lovers, not even for such lovers as you two who have nothing to do with the world as it is. No, a world of lovers would be impossible. It would be a mere ruin of lives which seem to be meant for something else." This, you may say, is the wisdom of the Realist; and it is true that Conrad is much more of a Realist than Scott and Dumas and Stevenson by virtue of the more searching truth of his psychology. But it is also the wisdom of poetry; the sad wisdom of romantic poetry protesting against the reality of life.

Whether or not Mr. Hergesheimer has taken his inspiration from *The Arrow of Gold*, he has turned the novel in *Cytherea* to the same purposes of poetry, of a disillusioned Platonism. Lee Randon was, like Monsieur George, possessed with a phantom love, symbolized by his doll Cytherea and embodied in his mistress Savina. This phantom love, for which he gave up decency, family, and social position, he conceives in the end as the creation of the dreams of civilized man trying in vain to free himself from the order of nature, which is concerned only with the species. "At the enigmatic smile of Cytherea," he realises, "men desert utility for visions." "That's her secret, what she's forever smiling at—her power, through men's vanity, to conquer the earth. She's the reward of all our fineness and visions and pleasure, the idol of our supreme accomplishment; the privilege of escaping from slavery into impotence. . . . We made her out of our longing and discontent, an idol of silk and gilt and perverse fingers, and put her above the other, above everything. She rewarded us, oh, yes—with promises of her loveliness. Why shouldn't she be lovely eternally in the dreams of men?" The death of Savina is the answer of reality to the question of the poet.

Cytherea has not been liked so well as the earlier novels of Mr. Hergesheimer. He is not so good as Mr. Conrad at combining the poetic intention with the novelistic, nor so good at the transcendental use of the novel as at the decorative. He has tried for depth; and the reader is conscious of thinness. This is still more the case with *The Bright Shawl*. There Mr. Her-

gesheimer is not content with the Platonism of love, where after all it is a question of personal happiness and a woman. And he turns to an even more abstract ideal—the ideal of freedom; not one's own freedom, nor even that of one's own country, but that of a foreign country deliberately adopted for the purpose. No woman is allowed, as in *The Arrow of Gold*, to motivate the hero's devotion to the foreign cause. No success or hope of success is allowed to support this enthusiasm in a vacuum. And there is no fighting; no blows are struck till the blow on the head of the hero that puts an end to his ideal pursuit. The outward trappings of the story are more gorgeous than ever; the Cuban setting is enough to melt in your mouth. But we are still more impressed with the sense that this lover of Platonic beauty has little or nothing to do with the world as it is. There is perhaps in the later work of Hergesheimer too great a discrepancy between the realism of setting and the poetry of characterization.

Probably the method of Mr. Cabell is after all the best for an idealism that will have nothing to do with the world as it is. Patusan or the island of Baron Heyst are a very good stage for the pursuit of such visionary ideals as Mr. Conrad deals in. But nothing short of Poitesme or that Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon in which Jurgen moves will serve the purposes of Jurgen or Count Manuel. One must speak of Mr. Cabell either briefly or at great length. All we can do here is to remind ourselves of the extraordinary originality with which he has invented a world in which he is at liberty to range at will—locally and morally—and put the human soul through all its paces without let or hindrance from our notions of the world as it is. No one has shown such technical inventiveness in the art of story-telling as Mr. Conrad, nor has anyone in our day so enriched the novel with new materials drawn from the strange actualities of our habitable globe. But nothing shows so well the untried possibilities of the novel for discoveries in the history of the soul as Mr. Cabell's creation out of whole cloth of a dream-world for himself. We know from his own *Beyond Life* and from Mr. Burton Rascoe's introduction to *Chivalry* how devoted he is to life on a purely romantic, a purely ideal, plane—any manner of life which conforms to Pater's prescription of burning with a

hard, gem-like flame. This poetic conception may be embodied, as Mr. Conrad has shown, in actual men moving among actualities. But Mr. Cabell has chosen to show it forth in purely representative figures moving through a purely representative country among types and symbols of life and circumstance. That is our present day exhibition of the search for the blue flower, or the Holy Grail.

III

We have seen how much of the ideology of poetry may be insinuated into the novel "without our special wonder", and how Mr. Cabell has used romance as a vehicle for the history of purely mythical characters typifying this or that phase of human idealism, thus reviving in prose and in duly modern idiom the allegory of *The Faerie Queene*. But the true lyrical intention is to be found in novels dealing with much less exotic matters than those of *Victory* or *The Bright Shawl* or *Figures of Earth*. It is matters of common experience that call for the interpretation of poetic faith and insight. It is again matters of common experience that call for a particularly intimate treatment to convert us. It is really the undistinguished people whose deeds and circumstances look so much like our own that demand a sympathetic subjectivism of treatment if we are to recognize them as the sisters of our dreams.

We have had quite recently some notable attempts to give such an intimate, sympathetic treatment of common experience in terms suggesting those of lyric poetry in its present-day phase. They have not met with any popular success, with no such success as the work of Mr. Conrad or Mr. Hergesheimer or even perhaps Mr. Cabell. The public have not known what to make of them—a public much less hospitable to radical innovations in the novel than in poetry itself. The most remarkable of these attempts, and much too successful to be called an attempt, is the series of novels of Miss Dorothy Richardson going under the general title of *Pilgrimage*. The guiding principle of her work is directness of presentation. In using the word directness one runs the risk of complete misunderstanding. For the method of Miss Richardson is the exact opposite of what many readers

might mean by direct. The author presents nothing; the author is non-existent. There is no narrative of event, no description, no characterisation, no psychological analysis, no philosophising. There is nothing but the sensations of Miriam, the girl whose experience is the subject of the books. In short there is none of that explanation which makes up so large a part of the ordinary story; and the reader used to explanatory hints and guide-posts gasps in bewilderment until he can get his bearings in this strange new world. For the sensations of Miriam are as inconsecutive, her ideas as liable to follow queer underground channels of association, as those of other people. What we derive is a large impression of the feel of life under certain conditions. It is something coherent and significant, but very elusive to the faculty of articulate statement. Many detached impressions are grouped together in sections and chapters by some indefinable instinct for composition.

The drawbacks of this system will be evident to any one who reads these lines. The great merit is in the extraordinary reality of the impressions conveyed. Man is not primarily a rational being, and plenty of us go through life, and especially through youth, without much sharper definition of issues than this young English woman. As with Miriam, life is not an affair of plot, with its definite pattern of cross-purposes, its Aristotelian beginning-middle-and-end. Miriam's life is a flowing stream of consciousness; her own movements are but tentacular extensions of her sensibility as she feels her way through the obscurities of a life but half conscious. It has heretofore been the convention of story telling, in the interest of story, drama, or instruction, to simplify and sharpen outlines by setting the characters to work with great directness at certain ends. Here is a new order of truth: life as unclassified dream-stuff. And having so high a degree of verisimilitude, representing so well our own experience, it strikes us as being truth such as we have never met with in fiction. And above all, if we have a bit of mysticism in our natures—and in whose nature is there not a bit of mysticism?—we are impressed, not merely with what may be called the surface truth of the sensations, but with the inner, or poetic, truth. It is here that Miss Richardson is so much superior to Mr. James

Joyce, whose *Ulysses* has been so widely hailed as the masterpiece in this manner. The method of Miss Richardson in prose is in general strikingly like that of some of the Imagist poets. But, strangely enough, she in her prose narrative more often gives the mystical sense of reality, which is the essence of poetry, than do the Imagists in their verse. This is indeed the one clue in this labyrinth of sensations—the conception of life as a mystical search for reality, for that elusive but recurrent sense of direct contact with the spiritual essence itself. The nearest analogy in poetry is Walt Whitman. The mystic exaltation which is Miriam's goal is the constant possession of the poet of Brooklyn. And it is Whitman who has familiarized us with that complete identification of the subject with experience which determines the technique of Dorothy Richardson's narrative.

Mr. Waldo Frank is still more clearly a mystic and a poet, though I don't undertake to say how good a one; and his *Rahab*, for example, is of the kindred of *Leaves of Grass*, though I don't know whether *Leaves of Grass* would have acknowledged the kinship. He has a vivid imagination, whether for reproducing the externals of physical experience or for striking through the externals to some purely symbolic imagery standing for facts of the spirit. The method of Dorothy Richardson he has carried even further, and has added certain technical devices which are at least interesting, which are perhaps better than that, and which may, in any case, still prove highly effective in the hands of real genius. One of these is the representation in the manner of spoken words of the mute dialogue of thoughts unvoiced—an ingenious and highly poetic way of dramatizing the eloquence of the inner life. Another novelty is the occasional introduction of passages of free verse, representing the moments of lyrical feeling, of mystical exaltation, of the several characters. I fancy that most readers would find this rather bizarre, especially in connection with the somewhat queer notions expressed in this manner. If Mr. Frank proves to be a less important figure than Miss Richardson, it will probably be because of a certain straining for effect which is felt even by readers disposed to welcome his experiments. But I do not wish to approach him here in a judicial, or even in a critical, spirit. I wish merely to bring him

into relation to the general movement for enlarging the scope of the novel. He should be appraised, when he comes to be appraised, not by any Philistine standard of literal truth. The truth that he has undertaken to represent in his fiction is not the surface truth of dialect and local color, not the truth of Mr. Tarkington or even Mr. Hergesheimer, but the inner, or poetic, truth to human nature in its strange unexplored world of things unspoken, and even things unthought. So that when the reader comes to the passage in a New York brothel in which are presented in the form of verse the soul states of several prostitutes, a judge, and a gambling-house proprietor, he is not to ask whether these people were trained to poetic composition, or even knew that they had poetry in their souls, but whether they had souls and whether these verses duly present them to us in significant terms.

It is for the want of such a warning that so many readers have fallen foul of Mr. Anderson's recent novel, which is likewise a work of essentially lyric intention. Sherwood Anderson is also of the progeny of Walt Whitman; the mystical conception of life and love is his; and the central situation of *Many Marriages*, which many readers find so distasteful and so unnatural, is a dramatization of a favorite theme of Whitman, the sacredness of the flesh. People say this is an impossible scene, that it violates all the canons of probability, of realism. About realism we need not worry. Probability is a more important matter, providing that we do not take probability in a literal and unimaginative way. The question is not whether the average maker of washing machines in a Wisconsin town would set up a statue of the Virgin and light candles and parade before it in the manner recounted in this book. It is not a matter of statistical probability—whether such a performance would be compatible with sanity in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. That might be a consideration in a novel of Howells or Galsworthy, of George Eliot or Edith Wharton. It would not be a consideration in a novel of Hawthorne or of Conrad. What we are here concerned with is poetical probability, the probability demanded by Aristotle. Is the thing well motivated? Does it represent something fundamental in human nature, normal human nature,

however unlikely to be enacted in literal fact? And the answer is: it is well motivated by the man's wish to save his daughter from the muddle in which his own love has been lost, to open his daughter's eyes as his wife's eyes had never been opened. And if it does not represent something fundamental in human nature, then we must deny the importance of Whitman and Lucretius and half the poets, ancient and modern. Many readers do not see the point of dragging in the sacred statue and the candles. But that again is something that might have strongly appealed to Whitman. It is not the particular holy symbol, except as a type of purity, nor the particular cult associated with Her, that Mr. Anderson wished to "feature"; and of course the last thing in his mind was a display of irreverence. It was simply that he wanted to bring the conception of love, of natural love, into the range of associations, associations poetic and religious, æsthetic and mystical, to which the Virgin and the candles belong, and for which no other symbols could be found in the Wisconsin town where the story is placed.

This is a composition, an arrangement, as the placing of Taou Yuen in the Unitarian Church in Salem is an arrangement in *Java Head.* Only it is a simpler arrangement, less prettily decorative, less theatrical, less suggestive of a magazine cover. It is more "naif", more "primitive", more Continental, more direct. It goes with the simplicity of style that gives Sherwood Anderson so much distinction in a time of foppery and scented phrase—with the simple recurrent imagery, of the covered well, for example, and the tearing down of walls. And it is this deliberate self-denying plainness of Sherwood Anderson as much as anything else that reminds us that he is producing a work of essentially Lyrical Intention. That is simply a phrase like another, like the Novel of Decoration or Transcendental Romance. But phrases are often helpful in determining our approach to work of an unfamiliar order. And Mr. Anderson is more in need of such a service than any of those of our time who are enriching the novel with new devices, new intentions.

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