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The Novel of Tomorrow

The Craft of Fiction

The Craft of Fiction, by Percy Lubbock. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. \$3.00.

GOOD as Mr. Percy Lubbock is when you take him sentence by sentence, he is better page by page, better still chapter by chapter, and at his best in *The Craft of Fiction* as a whole. Quotations may be found almost anywhere which give you a taste of his quality, which easily prove him to be a man of imagination and taste. But not by quotation can any adequate notion be given of his originality. For he has done something new under the sun, and the only way to appreciate his newness is to watch him at work, to follow his process as he applies it again and again, to this masterpiece and to that, leaving nothing as it was before he turned on his searchlight.

Summary is perhaps a safer mode of trying to review his book, yet by summary it suffers injustice of another kind. I may say, for example, that Mr. Lubbock looks away from the material which experience and imagination and attention put into Tolstoy's hands, and looks hard at Tolstoy's treatment of all this material, that he follows the same method with Balzac and Dickens and Thackeray, with Flaubert, Meredith and Henry James. Such a statement is accurate enough, yet it gives no idea of what Mr. Lubbock has done. It suggests a picking to pieces, an inventory of things mounted on slides. It is a *suggestio falsi*, for Mr. Lubbock's way of taking a novel apart is a way of making it live again as a whole, and with an intensity and in a form which we were quite unable to see and to feel for ourselves.

Yet what can one do with Mr. Lubbock beyond summarizing and quoting him? No other instrument is at hand—except gratitude, and gratitude is seldom descriptive—for measuring the proportions of his book.

"In all our talk about novels," Mr. Lubbock says, "we are hampered and held up by our unfamiliarity with what is called their technical aspect, and that is consequently the aspect to confront. That Jane Austen was an acute observer, that Dickens was a great humorist, that George Eliot had a deep knowledge of provincial character, that

our living romancers are so full of life that they are neither to hold nor to bind—we know, we have repeated, we have told each other a thousand times; it is no wonder if attention flags when we hear it all again. It is their books, as well as their talents and attainments, that we aspire to see—their books, which we must recreate for ourselves if we are ever to behold them. And in order to recreate them durably there is the one obvious way—to study the craft, to follow the process, to read constructively. The practice of this method appears to me at this time of day, I confess, the only interest of the criticism of fiction. It seems vain to expect that discourse upon novelists will contain anything new for us until we have really and clearly and accurately seen their books."

Mr. Lubbock's way of trying to see a novel is to discriminate the various substances of which it is composed, the different forms of narrative that its author uses. A few of these are the dramatic scene directly given, the generalized picture, the author's own information supplied by himself, the past as some character in the story sees it when he looks back, autobiographies each after its kind, the dramatized mind of some spectator. While a novelist is using one of these, or changing from one to another, Mr. Lubbock goes along with him, trying to see the value and the reason of his changes and choices, even when he made them unconsciously, and showing how they help or hinder the full expression of his subject. And this Mr. Lubbock does without any aesthetic *parti pris*. He does not deal in abstractions. He acknowledges no universally applicable laws. For him every great novel makes its own laws, whether it keeps or breaks them. "Is this proceeding of the author the right one," he asks, "the best for the subject? Is it possible to conceive and to name a better?" But the conception of a better comes to him from the heart of the book itself. He has not been brought up, neither does he teach, in any one school.

Readers of Henry James's letters, published two years ago, will naturally expect Mr. Lubbock, their editor, to be particularly good on the craft of Henry James's fiction. And good is what Mr. Lubbock is, extraordinarily subtle and illuminating. "The world of silent thought is thrown open," he says of *The Ambassadors*, "and instead of telling

tween the novelist's point of access and his grasp of form—and by form I mean all that is usually included in style, plus whatever has to do with the sense of something transacting between the book and its reader. Whoever lays hold on the collective mind at the node from which issues the green bough of constructive change, finds himself impelled toward what is later discovered to be the prophetic form. What, after all, is the slow growth of appreciation of a novelist of the first rank, but the simultaneous widening of our social consciousness to a sense of its own direction.

American novelists are often accused of a failure of form. But is this anything more than an admission of failure of access on the part of the critics? Characteristic art form is seldom perfected until the culture of which it is an expression comes to rest. Of all the factors influencing the American novel form, I should expect the necessity, inherent in a democratic society, of conforming more directly, at any given moment, to the *state* of the collective consciousness rather than to its *direction*, to be the determining item. This is what, generally speaking, conditions the indispensable quality of access. Under the democratic condition it can be achieved only by participation. There is no place in the American consciousness for the superior being standing about with his hands in his pockets, "passing remarks."

The democratic novelist must be inside his novel rather than outside in the Victorian fashion of Thackeray or the reforming fashion of Mr. Wells. He may, like Mr. Sherwood Anderson, be so completely inside as to be unclear in his conclusion about the goal, but there he is, Americanly, on his way. The reference of personal conduct to an over-*head* Judgment which forced the earlier novelist to assume the god in the disposition of his characters, has here given place to a true democratic desire of man to see himself as he is seen by the people with whom he does business. His search is not so much for judgment as for revelation, quick, nervous appreciations of place, relationship and solidarity. But in every case the validity of the American form will rest upon that intuitive access to the collective consciousness, which it is the dream, and probably the mission of democracy to achieve.

MARY AUSTIN.

A Note on Alcoves

IT is surprising what protean gifts a theme develops once you attempt to grapple with it. When the editors of the New Republic asked me to write about The Form and Scope of the Novel, the affair seemed simple. But, with the task actually begun, the typewriter bell may hardly tinkle thrice before one sees that the guide to further composition must be the once celebrated chapter, in I forget whose Natural History, upon the snakes of Iceland. It read, as you recall, "There are no snakes in Iceland." For one perceives that the form and scope of the novel, if not similarly non-existent, at least stay indeterminable in lands wherein the form and the scope of prose fiction stay limitless.

The sole aim of the written, printed and formally labeled novel is, I take it, to divert. Such is (one may assume with in any event quite reputable backing) the only aim of creative writing, and of all the arts. But much the same sort of diversion seems to be the purpose

of a staggering number of human endeavors: and it is when one considers the novels which are not formally labeled, that the theme evasively assumes all manner of shapes, and the field of prose fiction is revealed as limitless.

I do not hunt paradox. I but wish in real sincerity to acknowledge that our trade of novel writing and publishing is an ineffably minor evincement of the vast and pride-evoking truth, that human beings are wiser than reason. Pure reason—I mean, as pure as human reason assays—reveals out of hand that the main course of daily living is part boredom, part active discomfort and fret, and, for the not inconsiderable rest, a blundering adherence to some standard derived from this or that hearsay. But human beings, in this one abnegation infinitely wise, here all discard the use of their reasoning powers, which are perhaps felt here to be at least as gullible as usual: and brave men cheerily deny their immersion in the futile muddle through which they toil lip-deep. Pinned to the wall, the more truthful of flesh and blood may grant that this current afternoon does, by the merest coincidence, prove answerable to some such morbid and over-colored description by people bent on being "queer": but in his mind forgetfulness is already about its charitable censorship of the events of the morning, to the intent that this amended account be placed on file with many expurgated editions of yesterday and the most brilliant romances about tomorrow. For human memory and human optimism are adepts at the fictions which everybody grasps, retails and tirelessly reiterates; they coin the fictions which every person weaves into the interminable extravaganza that he recites to himself as an accurate summing up of his own past and future: and everywhere about this earth's revolving surface moves a circulating library of unwritten novels bound in flesh and haberdashery.

Now the wholesome effect of these novels is patent. It is thanks to this brace of indefatigable romancers that nobody really needs to notice how the most of us, in unimportant fact, approach toward death through gray and monotonous corridors. Besides, one finds a number of colorful alcoves here and there, to be opened by intoxication or vengery, by surrender to the invigorating lunacy of herd action, or even by mental concentration upon new dance-steps and the problems of auction bridge. One blunders, indeed, into a rather handsome number of such alcoves which, when entered, temporarily shut out the rigidity and the only exit of the inescapable corridor. And in addition, as we go, all sorts of merry tales are being interchanged about what lies beyond the nearing door and the undertaker's little black bag.

These are not, though, the only anaesthetics. The human maker of fiction furnishes yet other alcoves, whether with beautiful or shocking ideas, with many fancy-clutching toys that may divert the traveler's mind from dwelling on the tedium of his journey and the ambiguity of its end. I have not yet, of course, come to consideration of the formally labeled novel, for this much is true of every form of man-made fiction, whether it be concocted by poets or statesmen, by bishops in conclave or by advertisers in the back of magazines. And since memory and optimism, as has been said, are the archetypal Homer and St. John, the supreme and most altruistic of all deceivers, the omnipotent and undying masters of omnipresent fictive creation, their "methods" are in the main pursued by the great pair's epigoni; who likewise tend to deal with the large deeds of superhuman persons seen through a glow

of amber-lucency not wholly unkin to that of maple syrup.

Of the romances which make for business prosperity and religious revivals and wars to end war forever, here is no call to speak. Nor need I here point out that wellnigh everyone who anywhere writes prose today, whether it takes the form of a tax return or a letter beginning "My dear Sir" or a magazine story, is consciously composing fiction: and in the spoken prose of schoolrooms and courts of law and social converse, I think, no candid person will deny that expediency and invention collaborate. It may be true that lies have short legs, but civilization advances upon them.

So do we all exist, as if in a warm grateful bath, submerged and soothed by fiction. In contrast to the inhabitants of the Scilly Islands, who are reputed to have lived by taking in one another's washing, so do we live by interchanging tales that will not wash. There seems to be no bound, no frontier trading-post, appointed anywhere to this barter of current fiction, not in the future nor in the years behind. Men have been, almost cynically, shown with what ease the romance which we call history may be recast throughout, now that America rejoices in a past which has all been painstakingly rewritten with more care of the King's English, and wherein the War of the Revolution takes its proper place as the latest addition to the list of German outrages. Our newspapers continue the war-time economizing of intelligence, and still serve patriotic substitutes in serials, wherein Red and Yellow and Black perils keep colorful the outlook, and fiends oppose broadminded seraphim in every political matter, and Messrs. Lenin and Trotsky emulate the apostle by dying daily. Our clergy are no less prolific in their more futuristic school of art, and on every Sabbath morning discourse engagingly of paradise and of that millennium of which the advent is somehow being brought nearer, one gathers, by the more energetic of our prelates taking notes and whiskey in the larger restaurants. The past, the present and the future are thus everywhere presented in the terms of generally pleasure-giving prose fictions: and life is rendered passable by our believing in those which are most to our especial liking.

Well, it is the task of the novelist—I mean, at last, the novelist who is frankly listed as such in *Who's Who*—to aid according to his abilities in this old world-wide effort, so to delude mankind that nobody from birth to death need ever really bother about his, upon the whole, unpromising situation in the flesh. It is the sole aim of the novelist, alike in art and commerce, to divert us from unprofitable and rational worrying, to head yet one more desperate sally from that ordered living and the selves of which we are tired.

So I suspect there must always be, to the last digit, precisely as many "methods" as there are novelists. For the business of the novelist is to tell untruths that will be diverting: and of their divertingness he can have no touchstone, before the receipt of royalty statements, save only the response which these untruths evoke from him. Some tale-tellers find themselves most readily bedrugged by yearning toward loveliness unknown and unattainable: these are, we say, our romanticists. To them are, technically, opposed the Pollyannas among fiction writers, who can derive a sort of obscure aesthetic comfort from considering persons even less pleasantly situated than themselves—somewhat as a cabin passenger on a sinking ship might consider the poor devils in the steerage—and so

write "realism." But the inspiring principle remains unchanged: you think of that which is above or below you in order to avoid thinking of what is about you. So it really does not greatly matter whether you travel with Marco Polo to Cathay or with the Kennicotts to Gopher Prairie. The excursion may be for the purpose of looking at beautiful things wistfully or at ugly things contemptuously: the point is that it is an excursion from the place where you regard over-familiar things with a yawn.

These truisms considered—and one fails to see why anybody outside the more popular magazines need dispute them—the form and scope of even the formally labeled novel seem fluctuating and indeterminable. The novelist will write in the form—with such dramatic, epic or lyric leanings as his taste dictates—which he personally finds alluring: his rhythms will be such as caress his personal pair of ears: and the scope of his writing will be settled solely by what he personally does or does not find interesting. For the serious prose craftsman will write primarily to divert himself—with a part thrifty but in the main a philanthropic underthought of handing on, at a fair price, the playthings and the games which he contrives, for the diversion of those with a like taste in anodynes. And to do this will content him. For he will believe that he may win to fame by brewing oblivion, he will hope to invent, if he be very lucky, some quite new form of "let's pretend." But he will not believe that anybody with a valid claim to be considered a post-graduate child can gravely talk about affixing limits to the form and scope of that especial pastime.

JAMES BRANCH CABELL.

The Novel Démeublé

THE novel, for a long while, has been over-furnished. The property-man has been so busy on its pages, the importance of material objects and their vivid presentation have been so stressed, that we take it for granted whoever can observe, and can write the English language, can write a novel. Often the latter qualification is considered unnecessary.

In any discussion of the novel, one must make it clear whether one is talking about the novel as a form of amusement, or as a form of art; since they serve very different purposes and in very different ways. One does not wish the egg one eats for breakfast, or the morning paper, to be made of the stuff of immortality. The novel manufactured to entertain great multitudes of people must be considered exactly like a cheap soap or a cheap perfume, or cheap furniture. Fine quality is a distinct disadvantage in articles made for great numbers of people who do not want quality but quantity, who do not want a thing that "wears," but who want change,—a succession of new things that are quickly threadbare and can be lightly thrown away. Does anyone pretend that if the Woolworth-store windows were piled high with Tanagra figurines at ten cents, they could for a moment compete with Kewpie brides in the popular esteem? Amusement is one thing; enjoyment of art is another.

Every writer who is an artist knows that his "power of observation," and his "power of description," form but a low part of his equipment. He must have both, to be sure;