

does an ingenious scenario suffice. The Novel with a Purpose and the Novel with no purpose but to keep the reader gasping, though the one have no plot and the other be plot alone; though the one by all solemnity, the other all smartness—these two are rooted in the same error. In both, the story commandeers the characters, and is not the inevitable record of their Life and Adventures. When the characters compel the events, not the events the characters, the novel is a good novel, whether the action be as placid as in the *Chronicles of Barset*, or as tumultuous as in *The Three Musketeers*.

Professor Phelps's epigrammatic definition presupposes, of course, this elementary test, and, thus based, seems to me as true as it is clever.

BY BOOTH TARKINGTON

You say that Professor Phelps's definition of the novel is arousing discussion and criticism. It arouses neither in my own placable bosom. One may think of a dozen other definitions without in any way damaging that of Professor Phelps's. I offer one, not in competition, but as a rather idle variation upon the theme: A novel is a thought about human life; a thought which can be fully expressed only by means of a plausible fictitious narrative, written by an artist who understands language. You see, this is liberal enough to cover the people who have novels in their heads, but never write 'em.

BY HUGH WALPOLE

As to whether Professor William Lyon Phelps's statement "A novel is a good story well told" is a fair one or no, I would say that, in my opinion, such a definition only pushes the matter one degree back. What does Professor Phelps mean by his term "A good story?" Is *Une Vie* a good story, is *Tristram Shandy* a good story, is *The Vicar of Wakefield* a good story? If he means that a novel to be a good novel must have a striking and manufactured plot then I would object

strongly to his definition. Such a statement brings us back to the old struggle with regard to the novel as to whether the inventor should think first of his fable to which he afterwards fixes his characters and from their interaction provide his narrative.

I believe that in the past, present or future the novel, if it is to be a good novel, must rest mainly upon the vitality of its characters. If the author is able to introduce us to a Dr. Primrose, an Emma Bovary, a Raskolnikov, a Clara Middleton, the tiniest detail concerning them provides us with our "good story."

What, as pure narrative, could be more thrilling than the birth of young Tristram Shandy or the performance of *Lucia* attended by Emma Bovary. If Professor Phelps is using "good story" in the more elementary sense then he omits from his definition the greatest masterpieces of all language. It will, I suppose, be admitted that the novel of to-day depends for its interest almost entirely upon the internal psychology, the reaction of character upon character, or the revelation of some fundamental idea through the action of character. This is all well enough if the revelation of character is attained by such methods, but if only vague and abstract psychology is our reward then we are more impatient with the failure than we were with the ill-success of the old school of external action. *There* at least we had something for our money—now only too often we pay our pennies, are led into a fog and left there.

But, whether it be the old school or the new, the test of the good novel is what it ever has been—character, and again character, and yet again—character.

BY HARRY LEON WILSON

There are novels that are not good stories well told. I have just read one.

There are good stories well told that are not novels. I heard one at a club bar the other day.

But what of it? Why the excitement? If I must quarrel with Profes-

sor Phelps it won't be over the way he defines the novel. Let us be on to what he says of it after he has it defined. I have never heard that the proof of the pudding is in the definition of it.

To wish a closer definition of what we roughly call the novel is a mark of the born fuss-monger—even one capable of using that horrendous locution “fictitious prose narrative.”

## THE ADVANCE OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL

BY WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

### PART V

*The greatest decade in English fiction—hunting in couples—Dickens—his popularity in Russia—Thackeray the sentimentalist—George Eliot—which is her best novel?—Anthony Trollope and his twentieth century reincarnation—few great women novelists—the Brontë sisters—smouldering passion—invention and imagination—Wilkie Collins—Conan Doyle—superiority of Americans in the short story—Irving, Poe, Hawthorne, Harte, O. Henry—contemporary Russian masters of the short story—reticence and dignity in American art.*

PERHAPS the greatest decade in the history of the English Novel was the period between 1850 and 1860 inclusive. The list of titles is more impressive than and comment thereupon. *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *Pendennis*, *Esmond*, *The Newcomes*, *The Virginians*, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Alton Locke*, *Hypatia*, *Westward Ho*, *Peg Woffington*, *Christie Johnstone*, *It is Never Too Late to Mend*, *The Cloister and the Hearth*, *The Warden*, *Barchester Towers*, *Doctor Thorne*, *The Woman in White*, *Villette*, *The Professor*, *Tom Brown's School Days*, *John Halifax*, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *House of the Seven Gables*, *Blithedale Romance*, *The Marble Faun*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In order to find a parallel to such a rapid production of masterpieces in English literature, we should have to go back to the best days of the Elizabethan drama. The Mid-Victorian publishers lived in the golden age: and their regular announcements—which make interesting reading in the advertising pages of old weeklies—must have aroused golden anticipations.

In one hundred years from *Clarissa*, *Tom Jones*, and *Roderick Random*, the novel had advanced to full maturity, with the complexity and technique that accompany the complete development of any form of art.

Great writers often come in pairs, and hunt the public in couples. Richardson and Fielding, Scott and Jane Austen, Dickens and Thackeray, Hardy and Meredith, Tennyson and Browning, Goethe and Schiller, Turgenyev and Tolstoi, Ibsen and Björnson, Hauptmann and Sudermann—to mention only some of the modern instances. A good thing this twinning seems to be for literature; genius echoes genius, and each rival spurs the other to his best.

Scott died in 1832; and within four years Englishmen were reading *Pickwick Papers*, the inspired writing of a new novelist, who had two great qualities absent in Sir Walter—humour and humanitarianism. Never was a man more kind to individuals than the great Scot; but his professional work resembles a long picture gallery, whereas the novels of Dickens make one glorified stump speech, abounding in sympathy for the outcasts, and shining with fun. No voice like this had ever been heard in