

MODERNISM AND THE NOVEL

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*I*N previous issues Mr. Paul Elmer More and Professor Irving Babbitt called to accounting the modern trend in American literature and criticism. Here Professor Gass narrows the discussion to the novel. All who read are aware that something has happened to the novel. Compare a novel by Dreiser with one by Dickens or Thackeray and the difference is at once striking and profound. The essence of this change is the rise of a new and purposeless attitude toward life, scientific and morbid, sometimes called modernism.

THE finest jest, as Max Beerbohm somewhere remarks, is cumulative, point upon point, each thrust opening out a new vista for the fancy to sweep through in breathless flight. Circumstance has been playing such a jest upon some of us for a score of years or more, and though I for one can smile at the cumulative irony of its strokes, I suspect that the smile is, as the phrase goes, on the wrong side of my mouth.

The jest has been played with the novel as pawn. For almost precisely a century now, the novel has been our chief way of expressing our temper, and the mirror we have looked into to see ourselves — as drama was for Elizabeth, satiric verse for Anne, and lyric for the Romantics of a hundred years ago. We have drama and satire and lyric, of course, for the change of temper and outlook are matters of proportion and emphasis, and not total displacements. But the novel has been our chief expression and reflection, and its changes record our profoundest symptoms.

For my own part — and I hope I am not quite so lonely as I feel — my aggrieved amusement lies in the discovery that the novel has failed me. One after one the things that gave me my old delight in it have been banned, till it has come to pass that the acclaim of a new novel or a new novelist is sufficient to prove that it — or he, or perhaps especially she — is not for me. There are the old novelists, to be sure, and I go back to them gratefully. Still, since I, too, have lived on into this new world, what I long for is the novel that does for us what the Victorian novel did so eminently well for the Victorians. And nothing in contemporary letters, prose or verse, has come to take the vacated place.

I speak broadly. The older novel, indeed, is still written, and still popular. When, the other day, I discovered Mr. Paul Elmer More saying that he had a sneaking admiration for Harold Bell Wright, I shuddered, but I knew what he meant. That reverend

gentleman does write novels of the older type. And there is something significant in the hold which that sort of novel has on the eternal rudiments of human nature. For rudimentary both he and his audience clearly are. But the livelier intelligences among the novelists have departed from those pastures. That is my grief.

Now all this, of course, may be sheer inertia on my part, an inability to move with the times, an impossible nostalgia for a vanished world. This is a suspicion that I dare not despise. But the fact remains that a change is not always for the better. Literatures have decayed, and civilizations themselves have vanished. I do not mean that we ourselves are in this parlous state, but that in these matters we are forever thrown back upon a critical reëxamination. And I should like, for a brief moment, to give as intelligible an account as I can of the heresy I have just confessed.

GONE THE OLD GAYETY

Delight in the older novel was a different emotion, certainly, from delight in the new: at all events it was a delight in different things. I say delight in the new, but when I think of *Ulysses*, *The Time of Man*, and *The Narrow Room*, I am not sure that delight is the right word. The new novel takes itself with the tense solemnity, as Mrs. Gerould has suggested, of the patient closeted with the doctor. The old, on the other hand, comported itself with a kind of gayety. It wore a touch of motley. Its author sat a little aloof from his creation, and he and his reader caught each other's eyes from time to time and smiled frankly.

What the reader felt about it — if he thought about these matters at all in the days before art escaped from the workshop and crept into the lay conscience — was that the novel blended three very excellent things — the tale, the drama, and the essay. Sometimes one and sometimes another of these elements predominated, and every reader had his favorite blend. He recognized it as a blend, however, and if he had his literary austerities, he saved them for the unmixed *genres*, feeling that austerity was a little misplaced here, where in their genial coöperation each element must give up something of its special perfection. And he found in this blend something of his own modern complexity as he looked out on an increasingly complex world, forced as he was forever to watch it, and interpret it, and keep his own objective in it clear to his own eyes.

Now it is just these objects of my own old delight that the

novel has one by one pitched overboard. Comment, plot, and character — each in its way was a mode of interpreting so much of life as the novel chose to depict. The comment spoke for itself, a sort of Greek chorus, Thackeray stalking through his own pages with his hands in his pockets, saying his say as the situation moved him. The plot made a cosmos of the novel, giving prospective significance to each detail and retrospective significance to the whole. And in character — not the bare externals of feature and manner, nor even the internals of mental idiosyncrasy, but the humanizing touch of the inner conflict between instinct and intelligence, between animal desire and elective principle — here above all, appeared the critical intent of the older novelist. And it is just this critical intent that the “new” novel, in varying degrees, has foregone.

BUT IS IT ART?

This banishment was accomplished ostensibly at the behest of art. And I pause for a moment upon this decree because it seems to me that in just this matter of art we have been very egregiously fooled. In one very real sense, art has had nothing to do with it. We would never have foregone interests that were still real at the dictates of a theory of literary composition. Art is, after all, a servant and not a master, though naturally it will strut in its master's waistcoat when its master is from home. For art is simply the best way of accomplishing an end. With the end itself it has nothing to do.

None the less, one of the liveliest battles of contemporary criticism has centered here. In Matthew Arnold's time it could be said without cavil that literature was an interpretation, or as he put it, a criticism of life. To-day, in the age of Spingarn — what a fall was there! — the critic who proceeds to criticize the substance of a piece of literature, the thing said, the value of it as an accomplishment, is assailed with scorn.

I cannot help feeling that there is something priestly, something hierarchic, in such an attitude. It is still wholly legitimate for a critic to confine himself to the field of art — that is, to the problems of literary workmanship. The professor of rhetoric is confined to just that aspect of literature. I am one, and I know. But it is also legitimate, if literature is an art, and art is occupied with the attainment of an end, to judge as discriminat ngly as possible the end itself. Really, the artist is not a sacred being.

And in whatever measure literature is an affair of human importance, in just that measure is a free and lively, and if necessary, acrid criticism of literature — end as well as means — a fine and salutary thing.

The misfortune of this dominance of art is seen very strikingly, I think, in the work of Miss Cather, whose fine talent, apparently in direct response, has gone all to the service of a theory of literary effect. We smile at the great to-do made by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries over the three unities of classic drama. But I doubt whether in all that Battle of the Books there was as much sheer worship of artifice as we are seeing in our day.

Miss Cather's theory has apparently prescribed that a picture of some intense experience should be made to emerge, as though inadvertently, from the casual observations of some colorless and trivial bystander. The results have been, inevitably, a picture as seen by a trivial and colorless mind. But of what Miss Cather's own vision, or sense, or feel of life is, I have no inkling.

Once, in *The Professor's House*, she abandoned her method, and began a story — rich and simple and direct, the events revealed through the mind of her protagonist, and he a man of luminous intelligence. But her art failed her; halfway through, with a significant action brewing and ready to boil over, the novel abruptly ended. The protagonist picks up an irrelevant manuscript, and — Miss Cather filled up the required three hundred pages with it. Even so, her art was praised — called experimental; but I suspect that her laudators squirmed before they found salvation in the adjective.

PROGRESSION TO CHAOS

I speak with genuine grief of Miss Cather, for I suspect that her mind is far more than a sensitive film. Superficially she would seem to be a victim of the artistic fallacy. Her fear of having something to say as from herself, her dread lest she reveal some vision of her own, lest she seem to judge, however tacitly, the segment of life she depicts, are orthodox artistic doctrine. But the causes lie deeper than any vision of art. Art, the arbiter of means, as I have said, would never have come to meddle with ends if, outside the workshop, the sense of ends had not grown dim, or vanished. A change has occurred in our tacit philosophy.

This is the change which, vaguely, we call modernism. That in literature it has lagged so far behind the modernism of physical

science is natural. For the findings of the intellect, even in the individual, seep only slowly into the cosmos of his mind. It is amusing to see how easily even the giants of the modern movement in its early stages — Bruno, Galilei, Descartes — were able to hold naïvely in one hand the great bulk of their mediæval theology while they laid with the other the foundation of so hostile a structure. That it should be still slower to permeate a whole civilization is inevitable. The spectacle of fundamentalism, still bulking formidably on the lower levels, indicates how far from saturated is society as a whole even now. But the dramatic events of the mid-nineteenth century have borne their fruits among the literary public. And the novel, which reflects for us our way of feeling our intellectual outlook, has come at last to respond to the change.

By the modernist I do not mean the slightly parochial foe of the fundamentalist, but the plenary heir of the last three centuries, who, if he has lost his status as least of the gods has won a status as chief of the beasts. I say this not in irony but with sober and simple intent. For this change marks the essential difference between the old state of mind and the new. In the older dispensation the individual had a sense of something beyond him by way of a pattern for his guidance. Now he stands at the uttermost frontier of his universe, the last word in evolution, a pioneer facing an uncreated future.

THE STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

His former attitude, as we look back on it now and see how deviously he came by his patterns, and what diversity the patterns of divers men revealed, has its comic aspects. He did, none the less, just by virtue of his interest in the pattern as he envisaged it, have a sort of standard for his judgment of the aspect of life that literature deals with. In imagining it, and thinking about it, his mind played in the region between life as he saw it and life as he conceived it in idea. And however he held himself to painting it as he saw it, the comparison was latent. To depict it at all was a tacit criticism of it.

Life, in other words, had a significance. However widely men differed in their sense of the perfection toward which it aspired, there at all events was the centre of their concern. And literature answered in kind.

Here, then, is the pivot of that change which has come about now that at last the intellectual adventure of modern science has

come to affect our inner sense of life. We stand at the frontier, without a goal, and our habits of thought have taken color from the science that has brought us there. For the man of science in his laboratory, the objective is a picture of the universe with man as an organic part of it. This universe is an accomplished thing. His concern, therefore, is limited to apprehending what is. With this attitude and habit of thought, what was left for the novel to do it has done — it has described with intense vividness the sensation of life.

The scientific ideal of a direct and intense and clear vision of *what is*, whatever it is, so that it is utterly authentic, and the utter avoidance of any personal bias in relation to the observed facts — this in terms of literature has eventuated in what we call the modern novel, of which the latest phase is the depiction of the stream of consciousness.

The stream of consciousness is an interesting phenomenon from the point of view of science. In evolutionary theory it is the normal state of the sub-human mind, or, more specifically, of the hypothetical human mind before it evolved into humanity. The transition of the pure fluid of the stream to its articulation for the selective and directive use of the reason *was* the evolution of humanity. Now that we are articulate, we can never quite attain to the purity of the subhuman mental state; still less can we represent that state in articulate symbols. But we can try.

Why we should try is a graver question. The yearning backward, however, is a logical development of the movement away from significance. For significance implies a sustained relation to something. At its last stand in the mind, it implies a culling of certain flotsam out of all that drifts by on the stream — of just such flotsam as, for a sustained purpose, may be built architecturally into a planned structure however humble. That is the essence of sanity. To scavenge all that floats by is, simply, insanity. I speak literally and not invidiously. At all events, whatever in its evolutionary struggle mankind has made of itself and for itself, and above all its very science and its literature, it has done by just this selection from the stream.

This yearning backward to the brute — seen notably in a Joyce, a Cummings, an Eliot, a Gertrude Stein, and symbolized there very obviously by certain inarticulate barkings spelled out for the consciousness of the silent reader — has had its exemplar in the men of science themselves. Since Darwin, despite the

hypothesis of evolution, they have been much more concerned to assimilate man to the brute than to celebrate the specific difference which makes him human. But the scientists have escaped the insanity of this last phase of the novel by the great inconsistency which will prove, I venture, their ultimate salvation. By taking for granted the human intellect, though the assumption played hob with their theory, they have tided it over. They have ignored it among their data, but they have used it sedulously among themselves.

All science, in fact, is nothing but the enlightenment of this intellect, either for its own satisfaction or for the sake of other desires. The value of this knowledge is as great as anyone cares to esteem it, but the fact that it is pursued because it is valued and esteemed a good, and would not be pursued if it were not so esteemed, points to the conclusion that science itself is subordinate, in the actual economy of life, to a more fundamental order of thought; that science, in a word, is sanctioned by our moral philosophy. Science may give us knowledge of profound significance in framing our moral philosophy; it does not give us one. It makes a map of the country; it does not provide the motive of the journey or prescribe the route.

This vigorous sense of living first, and then, because it is a good thing, pursuing science, is one way of putting the point of view of humanism. Humanism offers a solid ground for those who cannot brook fundamentalism with its mediæval mythology, nor be content with a modernism that, for all its youthful promise, can never do more than describe the scene. It takes no jot or tittle from the glorious adventure of science. But it sees that the central problem, and hence the central interest, of life — since life and intelligence are given — is what to make of it, that is, what values to pursue in it.

SCIENCE AND LITERATURE

Now it is just the happy division of labor between science and literature that the one turns its intelligence upon the material universe, curious to build up and express an understanding of an accomplished fact, while the other turns its intelligence upon the human drama, curious to build up and express an understanding of a process forever incomplete. Each at its best adjusts its intelligence to the nature of its task. The one ponders the given data in relation to causes that lie behind. The other

interprets the given data in relation to objectives that lie before. It is just by its imagination projecting ends and by its intelligence finding means to gain them that human life differs from biological life in the swamp and the kennel. And literature, when it knows its task, responds in kind.

In sheer facts, whether of the outer world or of the inner stream, there is no humor, and no pathos, and no significance. Hence a certain monotonous gloom in the novel of the day, and a certain futility. But in the incongruities and inconsistencies, the successes and the failures, that strew the interval between actuality and aspiration lie both comedy and tragedy, and all the significance that life has.

When literature shall have learned the genuine lesson of science, not to ape it but to adjust its intelligence to the nature of its subject — so runs my dream — the novel will regain its full human sanity. And it will call back from exile its old collaborators to work together at their old task of building up and expressing an understanding of the drama of aspiring mankind.

HOROSCOPE

HOW, in the sordid lees of fortune, we
 Accuse the sun, convict the moon and stars!
 The plumed sidereal aristocracy
 Is fellowed to our guilty calendars:
 Thus, we are fools or knaves, haggard and pale
 In the world's aspect, hoofed and horned like goats,
 Because beneath the sweaty Dragon's Tail
 Our parent sowed a sorry crop of oats.

We sigh like Tom o' Bedlam; thus and thus
 Vent our uncouth complexion on the Bear;
 And to the athletic Sagittarius
 Ticket the satin that our neighbors wear. . . .
 Hatched under Bethlehem's most private Star,
 We should have been no happier than we are.

—*Joseph Auslander*