

THE LITERARY ART*

By THOMAS H. RADDALL

THESE are times when everyone is concerned about the quality of the literature, or perhaps I should say the quality of the reading matter, chiefly in the form of fiction, now being put before the public. The advent of the so-called pocket book especially has produced a flood of fiction to be had for twenty-five cents or fifty cents a copy at any drugstore or wayside refreshment stand. Its appeal is set forth usually in a picture on the cover, and some of our moralists are more concerned, it seems to me, with the picture on the cover than they are with the printed matter inside.

I suppose I should blush when I mention this because some of my own novels, after the regular publication in cloth covers, have appeared in the drug stores in paper covers; and one of my fellows in a Canadian learned society last year complained that the picture on one he had seen showed a good deal more of the Nymph than of the Lamp. I informed him that I had not been consulted about the picture, indeed I was not consulted about the pocket book arrangements at all, that being a matter reserved by my regular publisher in his contract with me. But when the first and worst of these pictures came to my notice I wrote an indignant letter. My publisher's reply was illuminating. "I was shocked myself," he said, "but it was too late to do anything about it. The pocket book people have distributed about two hundred thousand of their edition all over the United States and Canada. However you may comfort yourself with this reflection, that a lot of unsuspecting people are going to find themselves reading a good book under false pretences."

However, that may be, the fact remains that we are witnessing the sale of enormous quantities of fiction, in cloth and paper covers, with or without pictures, which do describe the human being as a creature devoted to sex and bloodshed. What is the explanation? Some of it undoubtedly reflects the convulsions of our time, which tore the cover off what we had believed to be a civilized world and left us gazing with a dreadful fascination at what we saw beneath.

But it seems to me that in the long view this printed obsession reflects something else, an extreme swing of reading

*The Samuel N. Robertson Memorial Lecture, delivered at Prince of Wales College, Charlottetown, P. E. I. on March 16, 1954.

taste away from the stuffy prudery of the nineteenth century and the early part of the present one. Most of the Victorian and Edwardian novelists portrayed men and women as creatures with no more blood than fish, as creatures without sex, or at any rate distinguished one from the other chiefly by their mannerisms and their clothes. The picture was false, of course, and the best of them knew it. Thackeray for one complained of the restraints put upon his pen by the false modesty of the age in which he lived. And he, who wrote so much about a previous age, must have known that the Victorian attitude was a reaction from the literary license of the eighteenth century, just as, before that again, the excessive sobriety of the Puritans was a reaction from the bawdy days of the cavaliers.

Apparently these things go in cycles, and it seems likely that the present output of grossness in print will bring about a reaction eventually that may go all the way back to the namby-pamby before the pendulum swings again. One extreme is as bad as the other, and I say a plague on both. We shall do well to consider the truth of the late Lord Tweedsmuir when he said, "Frankness in literature is an admirable thing if, as at various times in our history, it keeps step with social habit; but when it strives to advance beyond, it becomes a disagreeable pose."

The social habit nowadays is very frank indeed, and I think that what we have to consider is not a deliberate assault upon the morals of the public so much as a disagreeable pose on the part of so many writers in our time. As such it will pass, and we need not alarm ourselves unduly about it. Good taste is not to be created by laws and censorship. It can come only from a clean palate in the public itself; and that is a matter best cultivated in the home and the school, where current writing can be tested against the best writing of the past, and where it may be shown that good fiction, without recourse to the macabre or the obscene, can be exciting and full of the color and "stingo" of life.

With a clean public palate the blood-and-sex poseur will cease to exist, for he will cease to be read, which is the same thing; and the writer of sincere purpose and commonsense will continue to keep his pen between those fraudulent extremes, trying to give life its full value, an existence not without its crimes and follies but also with its noble themes of love and courage and self-sacrifice. Evil there is, and it must be set forth, but so must be the finer aspect of mankind; and each in its true proportion to the whole, no more, no less.

In a famous *mot* Stendhal remarked, "A novel is a mirror walking along the road." That is not quite enough. Mirrors cannot feel, and the writer must. Otherwise Stendhal is right. And the mirror walking along the road must keep a steady gait. It cannot linger by the pig-sty any more than it can come to a full stop before the wayside shrine. It can only reflect what is there and pass along.

How is this actually done? There is no magic formula as we well know. But this much is clear, and it is the foundation. The best creative writing, the stories that have survived the mills of time, were the work of writers who regarded their profession not merely as a trade (and most worth-while authors have written for their living) but as the satisfaction of an instinct, a craving if you like, to capture with ink and paper the spirit, good or evil, of mankind. And this inner drive, this personal daemon, qualified the task. It gave them in fact a two-fold law; to write with absolute honesty and to make it *readable*. For all good writing is just that. Joseph Conrad, one of the most honest writers in English literature, put it in this way: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel, it is before all to make you see. That and no more—and it is everything."

To do this it seems to me the writer must set himself apart—not physically, for he must mingle closely with humanity in order to feel its warmth and learn its heart and mind—but apart in thought, apart from his own prejudice as well as the prejudice of others, seeing mankind with the eyes of a curious stranger. Perhaps this sounds a little cold, as if mankind were just a fly beneath the lens, but I do not mean it in that way. The observer may be moved to tears or laughter. He may convey loathing or compassion or exaltation at what he sees and feels. But there he must stop. It is not for him to lecture or to preach. That is best done by the teacher and cleric, whose business it is, and who are better qualified. Some very good writers have indulged in pet social or political theories or in hammering home with obvious blows whatever moral might be in their tale; but their book lived in spite of these intrusions not because of them, and it is proof of their general excellence that the book survived at all.

Of course books may be aimed at particular groups, and that is a legitimate object; but it is not the legitimate object of literature, whose appeal must be universal. As a rule, the mo-

ment a writer begins to intrude upon the reader with his own views of politics, morals, religion or anything else that does not belong absolutely to the story he set out to tell, in that moment he begins to lose "readability", and when a writer ceases to be readable his whole object has been lost. In the words of Somerset Maugham, "The novel, I cannot repeat too often, is not to be looked upon as a medium of instruction or edification, but as a source of intelligent entertainment." Or as he expresses it in another place, "I think it is an abuse to use the novel as a pulpit or a platform. Fiction is an art, and the purpose of art is not to instruct but to please."

Now, to please does not mean to pander to whatever public taste may be current. It does mean to set forth what is in the writer's or the painter's or the sculptor's mind so that it has the form, the color and substance of the thing he saw, in the way he saw it, and because it satisfied him in that way. His obligation is always to the truth. In whatever degree he falls short of that he fails in his art or his craft or whatever you wish to call it.

I am aware that Art is a word that nowadays has fallen into disrepute. On every hand it is invoked to explain or to apologize for all sorts of monstrosities. "Artistic talent," Aldous Huxley observes, "is a very rare phenomenon. Whence it follows that in every epoch and in all countries most art has been bad. But the proportion of trash in the total artistic output is greater now than at any other period."

A few years ago the Royal Academy held its annual banquet in London to celebrate the opening of the summer show, and amongst the guests were the Archbishop of Canterbury and Mr. Winston Churchill. When the retiring president of the Academy, Sir Alfred Munnings, got up to speak, he made some of our modern art dilettantes red in the face. He declared, "If you want to paint a tree for Heaven's sake make it look like a tree." And he went on to say, "Not long ago Mr. Churchill and I were walking together. Mr. Churchill said to me, 'Alfred, if we saw Picasso coming down this street would you join me in kicking hard a certain part of him.' I said, 'Winston, I would.'" All this and much more was broadcast over the BBC, and the next day there were protests not only about his sentiments but the language he had used. To the press he said stoutly, "I apologized to the Archbishop last night. But I repeat, modern art is all a lot of damned nonsense."

"All" is a big word of course; it takes in a lot of territory.

But I confess myself in sympathy with Sir Alfred when I regard paintings that show the human form as a tangle of cubes and triangles, or a street scene or a pot of flowers daubed apparently in an alcoholic nightmare; and when I see sculpture resembling a poor African's carving with a dull knife in very hard wood, or nothing at all but a madman's exercise with mud in the asylum yard; and when I read novels that begin and end nowhere, with strange perverted creatures in human form who speak a language never heard on land or sea, or who on the other hand speak entirely in the idiom of the brothel or the slaughterhouse or the latrine. When I regard any of these common features of modern art and letters I cannot help thinking that it's all a lot of nonsense, and that the world of the future may look back on this age as one to be remembered chiefly for a strange return to primitive tribal wars and to primitive forms of art.

I do not suggest that all practitioners of so-called art are fools or atavists. On the contrary the movement has been led by men of undoubted genius, if somewhat erratic genius, like Picasso in the field of painting, Epstein in sculpture, Joyce and Faulkner in letters, all of them no doubt sincere in their revolt against convention and their belief that the mirror they held up to life was true. The trouble is with too many of their followers. When it was discovered by inferior minds that to paint you need not be able to draw, that to represent the human form in clay or stone you could dispense with all proportion, and that to write novels you need not trouble your self about plot, or form, or balance, or decency of expression, or even the simplest rules of grammar and composition, then came the deluge of bad art which is now upon us. These people walk the highway holding up their third-rate mirrors and calling on the world to see its image, and too many of them are acclaimed by critics busy hiding their own confusion behind the jargon of their trade. Mirrors can be too small to reflect anything but a narrow view. Mirrors can be warped, so that the reflection is distorted; or they may be foggy, so that the reflection is too dim for beauty or for truth. Even a looking-glass that has none of these flaws may be held too long before the shambles or the cess-pool, and hurried past the flowers on the hill.

But I must not beat Stendahl's metaphor to death. In my profession we hear much talk of Art—with a capital A. True art is what we all hope to achieve of course, in our small and vague and separate ways. Most of us know false art when we see it but who knows exactly what true art is? There are

as many definitions as there were tongues in Babel. If we look to those who are acknowledged true artists by good authority we find they cannot help us. Walter Sickert, the great English painter, answered one earnest soul in this way: "My pictures are like the clippings of my nails. They grow out of me and I cut them off and that is all I know about it." When someone asked Mozart for an explanation of his music he answered bluntly, "How do I know?" Bernard Shaw declared, "Sometimes I do not see what a play was driving at until quite a long time after I have finished it; and even then I may be wrong about it just as any critical third party may be." And he went on to say, "The truth is that we are apt to deify men of genius by attributing to logical design what is the result of blind instinct. What Wagner meant by True Art is the operation of the artist's instinct, which is just as blind as any other instinct."

To my mind one of the best things Kipling wrote, and certainly the most shrewd, was the little ditty he called The Conundrum of The Workshops. Forgive me if I repeat the opening lines, which probably you know.

"When the flush of a newborn sun fell first on Eden's green
and gold,

"Our father Adam sat under the tree and scratched with a
stick in the mould;

"And the first rude sketch that the world had seen was joy
to his mighty heart,

"Till the Devil whispered behind the leaves, 'It's pretty,
but is it Art?'" "

Adam, foolish man, was dissatisfied with his work at once; and although Kipling didn't say so I suspect it was then that Adam, glancing about for fresh inspiration, discovered a charming female person toying with an apple and forgot what he was about. Anyhow the moral is plain. Don't be too much concerned with Art in the abstract, for the Devil himself doesn't know what it means. He can only raise the point in the regular practice of his trade.

The plain fact is that a self-conscious endeavor towards Art defeats its own purpose always. The writer's path to perdition is paved with such endeavors. And the irony of it all is that the decisive word Art belongs to the future in any case, in literature as in everything else. Posterity alone will decide which books of our time shall continue to be read and which shall not, and whenever that final judgment is reached the authors will be dead. So Art with a capital A is not a matter of prime concern to those writing here and now, at any rate it should not be.

Our proper concern is the work at hand, the material we gather by study, from our own observation and experience of life, and the fashioning of that material with all the skill and truth we have; and the best that we can look for is that something of what we write may be found good by discerning readers of our own time, leaving the question of art to that mysterious judgment of the future. Coventry Patmore set forth an honest writer's creed when he wrote in the year 1886: "I have written little but it is all my best. I have never spoken when I had nothing to say, nor spared time or labor to make my words true. I have respected posterity, and should there be a posterity that cares for letters I dare to hope that it will respect me."

But whether the work be found good or bad, now or hereafter, the first judgment and the only real satisfaction are to be found in one's own heart. I do not mean a crass and blind self-satisfaction. That is a delusion. I mean the satisfying of that instinct for craftsmanship which surely must be present to some degree in writers all, since it made us choose this difficult medium in the first place. And it is this instinct, this personal daemon, that keeps us at the task in spite of all the devils in the shrubbery. For there is more than one devil abroad, mark you. The chap who whispers, "It's pretty but is it Art?" is only the first of many.

If you are a Canadian writer beginning the long struggle for recognition there is always a devil who repeats that savage quip of old George Bernard Shaw to a delegation from the Canadian Authors' Association years ago—"Who ever heard of a Canadian author?" And he goes on to crush you with, "My poor fool, who are you to offer your miserable wares in the marketplace where people come to buy Maugham and Hemingway?" And there is his fellow devil who comes along nowadays, smites you over the head with the full weight of the Massey Report, and cries, "Canadians don't buy Canadian books. It's a proven fact. And if they won't, who will?"

There is the devil who turns up after you have toiled for some years and whispers, "Look here, why not take the cash and let the credit go? After all money's the only measure of success. And you've got yourself to think about. You don't want to drag out your old age in poverty or on the charity of your friends like almost every Canadian writer in the past, do you? Now be sensible. Here's the formula. It's quite simple. Katherine Windsor and Mickey Spillane have done it, why not you?"

There is the devil who takes your book in his long artful fingers and says, "It's alright in its way but after all this is regional stuff. It's merely provincial. Why don't you aim at the Great Canadian Novel?"

There is the devil (sometimes a he-devil, sometimes a she-devil) who says, "Now with regard to your characters, the men are alright. Some of them are magnificent. But it's plain to be seen that you don't know a thing about women." And there is the devil who comes right along behind and says, "Nonsense! I like your women. Anyone can see that you've made an intimate study of women all your life. But your men!"

There is the devil who says, "Now look here you've written something very good about sailors (or prairie farmers or unhappy suburban wives or Julius Caesar's bodyguard) and obviously that is your natural line. You should stick to it. For you there should be no other people in the world. Get right down in that groove, my friend, and stay there."

There is the devil who looks down his nose and says, "I hear your last book didn't sell very well. But then I always said you hadn't got the touch for that sort of thing." Or he comes to you and says, "So your new book is a success. I'm sorry I can't congratulate you. It's so obvious that you've thrown away your principles."

And so on. Devils and devils. And some of them such charming devils, too. They take such an interest in your work.

Do you remember Monsieur de Vauversin, the strolling player whom Stevenson found on his Inland Voyage? I have always liked poor Vauversin, and what he said to R.L.S. has meant something to me in the quest that begins when one first takes up the pen and can end only with one's life. For it fits my own notion of workmanship and it has a value in that blind journey towards the mysterious realms of art which all of us experience. You will remember that Vauversin had known better days in the theatre but that he and his lady were reduced to playing in wayside barns, before audiences of indifferent yokels. At the close of one such performance he gave the voyagers his profession of faith.

"I must go about the country gathering coppers and singing nonsense. Do you think I regret my life? Do you think I would rather be a fat burgess, like a calf? Not I! I have had moments when I have been applauded on the boards. I think nothing of that. But I have known in my own mind some-

times, when I said not a clap from the whole house, that I had found a true intonation or an exact and speaking gesture; and then, messieurs, I have known what pleasure was, what it was to do a thing well, what it was to be an artist."

That has always seemed to me a pretty good philosophy for a writer, too, especially a Canadian; for the Canadian writer as a matter of necessity has to look abroad for most of his income and his fame. He may not have to go about the world singing nonsense for coppers. There may be times indeed when like Vauversin he will be applauded as an artist, and on the boards of Paris itself. But like Vauversin he should think nothing of that. What matters first and last is within himself, a passionate care for his craft. If he lacks that he has nothing. If he has that, nothing else matters, whether he sells his work at home or abroad, for coppers or a fortune, and no matter what diabolical whispers he may hear behind the leaves. I hope that some of you here will turn your ambitions to the pen and take up the task of refuting the late Mr. Shaw.

TO A UNIVERSITY

By JULIA GRACE WALES

One came a missioner from your grey towers
 That soar between green earth, blue heaven, to ply
 The teacher's task in one of those *high schools*
 (Fit words to hold the space and air of learning)
 Erected on the sightly hills of towns
 Above bright river reaches; with pointer moving
 Across the maps of the world, told the incredible
 Story of man's quest; opened the pages
 Of poetry and woke the inward ear.
 Crisp were our new books, lofty the windows.
 The morning light illumined the near page
 And whitened the far towers.

And still they rise

Between an autumn earth and darkening heaven,
 In fateful days a handhold of the spirit—
 Grey crags above the void, those granite towers.