THE FUNCTION OF THE NOVEL

Basil King

I.

Of all the gifts with which a people can be endowed, the most useful is a rich imaginative faculty. It is also the surest to yield practical results. Without this imaginative faculty practical results will be trifling. Nations are great, prosperous, and powerful precisely in proportion to the measure in which the national imagination works. Material resources are important, but they are secondary. With an easy, eager imagination a people will take any resources, or no resources, and build an empire. If resources are lacking, imagination will find a way by which to go out after them.

A review of the rise and fall of empires would easily prove that this is so, but for such a review this is not the place. It will be sufficient for my theme to glance at the formation of the British Empire. This was built up through the force of instinctive, constructive imagination, working in a people from the days of the sea-scourers of the pre-Christian era down to this twentieth century feeling its way toward a federation of commonwealths. At every step imagination has been the driving impulse. It was back of the Celts who crossed Asia and Europe to come to a halt in the western isles, where they replaced the prehistoric race that had built Stonehenge. It was back of the Angles who crossed from Jutland, of the Normans who crossed from Dives. It was back of every migration, and every voyage of discovery, and every hoisting of the Union Jack on some new extension of England. Someone first saw a vision and dreamed a dream, without which there could have been no fulfilment.

Through imagination America was discovered, and its countries were founded. Imagination is the life of the history of Canada in particular. In no other country in the world have the dreams of sailors, soldiers, explorers, priests, and saints so persistently gone before the efforts of the trader, the merchant, the farmer, the engineer, the banker, and the politician. It is perhaps the common belief that this last group alone have made modern Canada; but this is true only in the degree to which the common gift of imagination has inspired all.

For it is behind all ambition, all foresight, all enterprise, all

thrift, all business. It is not too much to say that without it no one succeeds. Without it no one sees his opportunities, or—seeing his opportunities—sees also the means by which they can be realized. Wherever there is a big factory, a productive orchard, a flourishing business, an office that hums with work, there someone's imagination was first on the spot, perceiving what could be done. Imagination is not merely the handmaid but the mother of all that we know as commerce, as art, as science, as invention, as discovery. It is even the mother of religion, since without the imaginative faculty there could be no conception of a God.

II.

To stimulate this faculty is the function of imaginative literature. It is the function of course of all creative work, though for the purpose of this article we must confine ourselves to a single field. From the earliest stages of the world, and up from the most primitive stages of our civilization, the place of the "tale" in the economy of human effort has been recognized. It has not, however, always been recognized as exactly what it is.

In general it has been taken as a pastime, and as a pastime only. One reads a novel to get relief from more serious occupations, or to distract the mind from care, or merely to kill a dull hour. Such reading is called "light", to distinguish it from what is more worth while. It is the part of wisdom to discourage this. It would be well, according to many minds, to do away with it altogether. Since that is impossible, it is treated as a mild form of dissipation, something which—like the drinking of tea or the smoking of tobacco—does harm, but not such vicious harm that it would be wise to stir up a revolution to suppress it. Even among the broader minded and the more intelligent the publication of what is commonly called "the flood of novels"—as a rule some two or three hundred—every spring and autumn is a matter to be deplored, while the adjective easiest to find for the individual work is "trashy".

I think this is a fair expression of the attitude of the ordinary standardized mind toward most of the manifestations of creative art, and the work of fiction especially. But it overlooks one basic psychological fact, or probably never knew it; that the vitality of the nation, the prosperity of the country, depends on the stimulation of the imaginative faculty, and that of such stimulation the novel is, next to the motion picture, the most easily accessible form.

Perhaps I may make a digression here to speak of the function of the motion picture, and the amazing response to it on the part

of the simpler people in every country in the world. I am not here dealing with the merit of the many picture-plays, but only with the fact that for the first time in the history of mankind the screen has brought to those whom our civilization has kept starved and thirsting for imaginative food something which feeds them. The food may be poor, but the appetite is ravenous. It will eat anything. The readers of this magazine, who have always had all they could ask in the way of literature, music, painting, plays, and whatever else can nourish the higher yearnings, have probably no conception of the famished condition of the enormous majority of our race. Hard work and poverty have made it impossible for them to be readers of books, or frequenters of the theatre, or anything but drudges at a daily grind. The imaginative faculty among them was being atrophied or choked, till the motion picture, cheap, universal—penetrating not only to the loneliest villages of the more sophisticated lands, but to the heart of India, China, and Africa—came to give it life. It is small wonder that wherever the cinema opens its doors the crowds are greater than those which throng colleges or churches. Where there is no vision the people perish, and the only vision the people were allowed to have was the meagre, narrow, dreary one of ceaseless toil and little play with which our civilizations provided them. With all the foolishness and salaciousness and false view of life with which you can charge it, the cinema has come to those who were dying of imaginative hunger and thirst with a food which is better than nothing. The good people who lament over this should have seen to it centuries ago that the mass of their brothers and sisters were not left to die from inanition of the one faculty which inspires.

III.

As a matter of fact, it is the impulse that condemns the motion picture which has always condemned the novel. It has condemned the novel because it has not understood what end the novel served. I repeat, therefore, that the end it serves is the nourishment of the imaginative sense. Without some such nourishment the imaginative sense grows feeble, and once it grows feeble a man becomes as dead wood. All the professions in the land are clogged with those who have allowed their imaginations to die, and have thus become themselves as living dead men. The churches and the colleges are full of them. Among doctors and lawyers and the permanent officials of all governments they are numerous. They infect whole communities. All over every land, and throughout Canada—I

am sometimes inclined to think—more than in any other country, there are villages, towns, cities, which even those who live in them are accustomed to speak of as "sleepy" or "dead". I am impressed anew with the use of these adjectives every time I revisit the Maritime Provinces. Halifax, St. John, Charlottetown are so persistently spoken of as sleepy or dead that one's fancy feels even in travelling on a train an atmosphere of decay.

If this use of words is justified, which I personally doubt, I should explain it on the ground that the people of the Maritime Provinces have allowed their imaginations to languish. Those with a conscious imaginative faculty, fearing this fate for themselves, have got up and fled for their lives. Those left behind have, in no small degree, lost the power of perceiving their opportunities. Unable to perceive their opportunities, they become stagnant, disheartened, and mentally inert. They do not attract immigration for the very reason that the prompting which sends the immigrant forth is the imaginative impulse, and he will go only where there is "life". Business seeks "life"; art, science, and education all seek "life". Where there is inadequate '"life", there is inadequate production, with its litter of consequent ills.

As I read the Canadian papers, I hear from the Maritime Provinces a long wail. They are not being treated fairly by big business enterprises, by the federal Government, by the rest of Canada. But it is a generally acknowledged principle that in the give-and-take of life we are treated as well as we deserve. If the Maritime Provinces cultivate the qualities expressed by such terms as death and sleep, the vital current of commercial and intellectual life will pass them by. Such incidentals as their geographical detachment, the tariffs raised against them, and a few more small disadvantages, are only what other countries have to face, and what imagination can overcome. What country in the world, for example, could have been more ill-equipped to become a great manufacturing centre than Great Britain? It had its coal, but it had nothing else. That is, it had nothing but the imagination of a people which steadily set itself to overcome its limitations, going to the furthest ends of the earth to bring back what it required. The example could be paralleled in many other countries. It could be easily paralleled in the Maritime Provinces, had not their inhabitants grown somewhat lethargic through the atrophy of the inspirational force.

I must repeat that this is not my personal opinion. I am trying only to explain the use throughout all three of the seaboard provinces of the two fatal words I have quoted above. I am trying

to fathom the spirit of complaint. A sturdy people, with that consciousness of strength which the imaginative gift imparts, does not complain. It acts. It relies on itself. It takes such resources as it possesses and exploits them. Where there are adverse conditions, as there always are, it overcomes them. If its sons and daughters show a tendency to go away, it developes the inducements to keep them at home. Where sons and daughters are glad to stay at home, the outsider will be glad to come. The Maritime Provinces strike one observer at least as a vast natural treasure-house in the hands of a people who hardly know what to do with it.

My point is that to keep up with the expansive movement of the world a man must maintain his imaginative powers at their highest working pitch. To this end the judicious reading of good novels is a means. It is not, of course, the only means, nor perhaps the most important means, but it is the means which to most men and women comes easiest. The novel can be utilized at odd minutes; it can be carried in the pocket or the hand. It is more than a pastime and a relaxation, just as the absorption of material food and drink is more than a pleasure to the taste. Those who give out must also take in; and the greater the imaginative wear and tear through teaching or preaching or business, the more insistent will be the demand that the exhausted resources be replenished.

It must be remembered that practically all occupations feed *on* the imagination, while art alone feeds *it*. In proportion as we give out of our creative force, in the office, or the shop, or the lecture-room, exactly in that proportion shall we need to renew our stores. The neglect of renewal can become a habit; and the habit is suicidal. For it is easier than we often think to let the imagination go unfed, to be unable to read novels, to sit through plays, to look at pictures, to listen to fine music. The man who gets into this unhappy plight can take accurate measure of himself. He has reached his limit. He will never go any further. He will probably find it difficult to remain where he is. He has nothing to point him to new ways, to obvious openings, to his own expansion with an expanding life. While life is expanding, he begins to contract; and the man who allows himself to contract, no matter at what age, has nothing before him but to die.

IV.

It is evident, of course, that there is unwise and excessive reading of fiction, and there is also fiction worthless in itself; but neither of these considerations is within our scope. My point is

made if it becomes in any measure clear to us that art is the food on which imagination flourishes, and that imagination is esential to every task in life. The novel helps to supply this need because it comes to us as an enhancement of experience. It takes the reader into places where he himself could never go; it shows him how other people deal with conditions similar to his own; it will lead him to views and adventures beyond his own sphere. When the book is closed, he has a whole new slice of life to think of and discuss. The result cannot but be an enlargement of his sympathies. When he next confronts his problem or his job, he can do so with a wider perception of all its possibilities.

It is not contended that the reading of fiction or the pursuit of art can take the place of other training of the mind. Of course not! It can do but one thing; it can stimulate the imaginative faculty; but in doing that it stimulates the entire inner man.

And to effect this stimulation, there is something that demands the living voice. We cannot confine our mental tonic to the classics, any more than we can limit our medical prescriptions to those that were put up in bottles fifty year ago. While Time can sanctify, it cannot preserve freshness. The unpsychological reasoner will often ask why we should read the "trash" of the moderns when we have Thackeray and Dickens and Shakespeare. The reply is that Thackeray and Dickens and Shakespeare are dead, and the dead voice cannot possibly utter all that is needed by a living generation. Each generation speaks primarily to its own children. We in 1923 cannot go back to the mental or emotional conditions of 1850 or of 1600. These epochs may tell us much, but they will never tell us what most we need to hear. The imagination of 1923 must be fed with the food of 1923. The masters of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries will be interesting to us,—but always dead. If we find them enough for us, it is because we ourselves have dropped back to the past, and have ceased that straining on toward the future which keeps a man vigorous and young. It is for his reason that the living mind instinctively asks for the "latest thing". You may call it "trashy" if you like, but it is rarely without a living quality which the dead author loses by the fact that he is dead. The dead is gone. It is a fact to be remembered when we allow ourselves to live with dead ambitions in dead communities. Only the living and the present is dynamic and productive, for ever seeking to express itself anew. The greatest fiction in England and the United States corresponds with the periods which in those countries were, and are, of greatest national activity. It is the easiest way in which the heart of a nation gets utterance. If there is little utterance, we may take it

for granted that there is little heart. A dynamic nation is dynamic in literature, or it is a nation only in name.

Therefore those of us who have the future of Canada passionately at heart are glad to see the stirrings of a Canadian literature beginning to make themselves manifest. They are only beginnings as yet, just as Canada itself—a country not yet sixty years old—is but at its beginnings in everything. It is a fact that the conservative and sophisticated, what we may call the university classes, are hostile to those beginnings as yet; but that is to be expected. These classes are generally hostile to the future, their hostility serving the useful purpose of the rubber against which children whet their teeth. The teeth grow stronger for the irritation. "It is in the arts," writes Edmund Gosse, in speaking of the enmity of Norway to its first distinguished son, Henrik Ibsen, "that the old colonial instinct of dependence is most loath to disappear."

It has to be admitted that in the arts Canada is still colonial and dependent. In imaginative literature it reads almost nothing which does not come from outside itself. The tidal wave of American publication which daily sweeps over the Dominion is often deplored, but it rolls in only because nature abhors a vacuum. There would be no room for it, were the Canadian's imaginative world not empty. If the patriotic hope to counteract it, they have a means; they can produce something of their own. A full cistern will receive no more, even though a billow flow over it.

But so far Canada as a whole lacks an independent intelligence. It distrusts its power of intellectual production. It distrusts its own judgment. Even in commercial and industrial things, which are easier to deal with, it is largely exploited by outsiders. One is struck with the fact that its one colossal achievement, the Canadian Pacific Railway, has never until very recently had a Canadian at its head. One Scotsman and two Americans have been its presidents, while at the moment of writing another American directs all the National Railways of the country.

Thus we hark back to the atrophy, or partial atrophy, of the imaginative faculty. It tends to keep the Canadian, and the Canadian of the Maritime Provinces especially, colonial and dependent. The colonial and dependent must of necessity be feeble, inadequate, second-rate. The pill may be bitter to swallow, and yet it is wisdom to swallow it. At the same time it is helpful to believe that the present waking of a Canadian creative spirit, so negligible to those who have let their imaginations die, and so hateful to that kind of provincial cultivation which never has confidence in itself, is a symptom of release.