

## VITALITY EN VOGUE: A PLEA OF AN AVERAGE NOVEL-READER

Indisputably the most striking defect of our modern American literature is the fact that the production of anything at all resembling literature is scarcely anywhere apparent. Our printing-presses, instead, are daily turning out a vast quantity of reading matter, the candidly recognized purpose of which is to kill time, and which—so it has been asserted, though perhaps too sweepingly—ought not to be vended over book-counters, but rather in drugstores along with the other narcotics.

It is begging the question to protest that the class of people who a generation ago read nothing, now at least read novels, and to regard this as a change for the better. By similar logic it would be more wholesome to breakfast off laudanum than to omit the meal entirely. The nineteenth century, in fact, by making education popular, has produced in America the curious spectacle of a reading public with essentially non-literary tastes. Formerly, better books were published, because they were intended for persons who turned to reading through a natural bent of mind; whereas the modern American novel of commerce is addressed to us average people who read, when we read at all, in violation of every innate instinct.

Such grounds as yet exist for hopefulness on the part of those who cordially care for belles-lettres are to be found elsewhere than in the crowded market-places of fiction, where genuine intelligence panders on all sides to ignorance and indolence. The phrase may seem to have no very civil ring; but reflection will assure the fair-minded that two indispensable requisites nowadays of a pecunarily successful novel are, really, that it make no demand upon the reader's imagination, and that it rigorously refrain from assuming its reader to possess any particular information on any subject whatever. The author who writes over the head of the public is the most dangerous enemy of his publisher,—and the most insidious as well, because so many publishers are in private life interested in literary matters, and would readily permit this personal foible to influence the exer-

cise of their vocation, were it possible to do so upon the preferable side of bankruptcy.

But publishers, among innumerable other conditions, must weigh the facts that no novel which does not deal with modern times is ever really popular among the serious-minded. It is difficult to imagine a tale whose action developed under the rule of the Cæsars or the Merovingians being treated as more than a literary *hors d'œuvre*. We purchasers of "vital" novels know nothing about the period, beyond a hazy association of it with the restrictions of the schoolroom; our sluggish imaginations instinctively rebel against the labor of forming any notion of such a period; and all the human nature that exists even in serious-minded persons is stirred up to resentment against the book's author for presuming to know more than a potential patron. The book, in fine, simply irritates the serious-minded person; and she—for it is only women who willingly brave the terrors of department-stores, where most of our new books are bought nowadays—quite naturally puts it aside in favor of some keen and daring study of American life that is warranted to grip the reader. So, modernity of scene is everywhere necessitated as an essential qualification for a book's discussion at the literary evenings of the local women's club; and modernity of scene, of course, is almost always fatal to the permanent worth of fictitious narrative.

It may seem banal here to recall the truism that first-class art never reproduces its era; but such banality is often justified by our human proneness to shuffle over the fact that many truisms are true. And this one is preëminently indisputable: that what mankind has generally agreed to accept as first-class art, in any of the varied forms of fictitious narrative, has never been a truthful reproduction of the artist's era. Indeed, in the higher walks of fiction, art has never reproduced anything, but has always dealt with the facts and laws of life as so much crude material which must be transmuted into comeliness. When Shakespeare pronounced his celebrated dictum about art's holding the mirror up to nature, he was no doubt alluding to the circumstance that a mirror reverses everything which it reflects.

Nourishment for much wildish speculation, in fact, can be got

by considering what the world's literature would be, had its authors restricted themselves, as do we Americans so sedulously,—and unavoidably,—to writing of contemporaneous happenings. In fiction-making no author of the first class since Homer's infancy has ever in his happier efforts concerned himself at all with the great "problems" of his particular day; and among geniuses of the second rank you will find such ephemeralties adroitly utilized only when they are distorted into enduring parodies of their actual selves by the broad humor of a Dickens or the colossal fantasy of a Balzac. In such cases as the latter two writers, however, we have an otherwise competent artist handicapped by a personality so marked that, whatever he may nominally write about, the result is, above all else, a record of the writer's idiosyncrasies. It suffices that, as a general rule, in fiction-making the true artist finds an ample, if restricted, field wherein the proper functions of the preacher, or of the ventriloquist, or of the photographer, or of the public prosecutor, are exercised with equal lack of grace.

Besides, in dealing with modern life a novelist is goaded into too many pusillanimous concessions to plausibility. He no longer moves with the gait of omnipotence. It was very different in the plamy days when Dumas was free to play at ducks and drakes with history, and Victor Hugo to reconstruct the whole system of English government, and Scott to compel the sun to set in the east, whenever such minor changes caused to flow more smoothly the progress of the tale these giants had in hand. These freedoms are not tolerated in American noveldom, and only a few futile "high-brows" sigh in vain for Thackeray's "happy, harmless Fableland, where these things are." The majority of us are deep in "vital" novels. Nor is the reason far to seek.

One hears a great deal nowadays concerning "vital" books. Their authors have been widely praised on very various grounds. Oddly enough, however, the writers of these books have rarely been commended for the really praiseworthy charity evinced therein toward that large, long-suffering class loosely describable as the average novel-reader.

Yet, in connection with this fact, it is worthy of more than passing note that the *New York Times'* carefully selected committee, in picking out the hundred best books of 1913, declared as to novels—"a 'best' book, in our opinion, is one that raises an important question, or recurs to a vital theme and pronounces upon it what in some sense is a last word." This definition is not likely ever to receive more praise than it deserves. Cavillers may, of course, complain that actually to write the last word on any subject is a feat reserved for the Recording Angel's performance on Judgment Day. Even setting this objection aside, it is undeniable that the multiplication tables correspond to the terms of this definition more accurately than did any work of fiction published in America during 1913. Yet the multiplication tables are not without their claims to applause as examples of straightforward narration. It is, also, at least permissible to consider that therein the digit five, say, where it figures as protagonist, unfolds under the stress of its varying adventures as opulent a development of real human nature as does, through similar ups-and-downs, the Reverend John Hodder in *The Inside of the Cup*. It is equally allowable to find the less simple evolutions of the digit seven more sympathetic, upon the whole, than those of Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*. But, even so, this definition of what may now, authoritatively, be ranked as a "best novel" is an honest and noteworthy severance from misleading literary associations such as have too long befogged our notions about reading matter. It points with emphasis towards the altruistic obligations of tale-tellers to be "vital."

For we average novel-readers—we average people, in a word,—are now, as always, rather pathetically hungry for "vital" themes, such themes as appeal directly to our everyday observation and prejudices. Did the decision rest with us, all novelists would be put under bond to confine themselves forevermore to themes like these.

As touches the appeal to everyday observation, it is an old story, at least coeval with Mr. Crummies's not uncelebrated pumps and tubs, if not with the grapes of Zeuxis, how unflinchingly in art we delight to recognize the familiar. A novel whose

scene of action is explicit will always interest the people of that locality, whatever the book's other pretensions to consideration. Given simultaneously a photograph of Murillo's rendering of *The Virgin Crowned Queen of Heaven* and a photograph of a governor's installation in our state capital, there is no one of us but will quite naturally look at the latter first, in order to see if in it some familiar countenance be recognizable. And thus, upon a larger scale, the twentieth century is, preëminently, interested in the twentieth century.

It is all very well to describe our average novel-reader's dislike of Romanticism as "the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass." It is even within the scope of human dunderheadedness again to point out here that the supreme artists in literature have precisely this in common, and this alone, that in their master-works they have avoided the "vital" themes of their day with such circumspection as lesser folk reserve for the smallpox. The answer, of course, in either case, is that the "vital" novel, the novel which peculiarly appeals to us average novel-readers, has nothing to do with literature. There is between these two no more intelligent connection than links the paint Mr. Dockstader puts on his face and the paint Mr. Sargent puts on canvas.

Literature is made up of the re-readable books, the books which it is possible—for the people so constituted as to care for that sort of thing—to read again and yet again with pleasure. Therefore, in literature a book's subject is of astonishingly minor importance, and its style nearly everything; whereas in books intended to be read for pastime, and forthwith to be consigned at random to the wastebasket or to the inmates of some charitable institute, the theme is of paramount importance, and ought to be a serious one. The modern novelist owes it to his public to select a "vital" theme which in itself will fix the reader's attention by reason of its familiarity in the reader's everyday life.

Thus, a lady with whose more candid opinions the writer of this is more frequently favored nowadays than of old, confesses to having only one set rule when it comes to investment in current reading matter—always to buy the Williamsons' last book. Her reason is the perfectly sensible one that the Williamsons'

plots invariable pivot upon motor trips, and she is an ardent automobilist.

This principle of selection, when you come to appraise it sanely, is the sole intelligent method of dealing with reading matter. It seems here expedient again to state the peculiar problem that we average novel-readers have of necessity set the modern novelist,—namely, that his books must in the main appeal to people who read for pastime, to people who read books only under protest and only when they have no other employment for that particular half hour.

Now, reading for pastime is immensely simplified when the book's theme is some familiar matter of the reader's workaday life, because at the outset the reader is spared considerable mental effort. The motorist before referred to, and indeed any average novel-reader, can without exertion conceive of the Williamsons' people in their automobiles. Contrariwise, were these fictitious characters embarked in palankeens or droskys or jinrikishas, more or less intellectual exercise would be necessitated on the reader's part to form a notion of the conveyance. And we average novel-readers do not open a book with the intention of making a mental effort. The author has no right to expect of us an act so unhabitual, we very poignantly feel. Our prejudices he is freely chartered to stir up,—if, lucky rogue, he can!—but he ought, with deliberation, to recognize that it is precisely in order to avoid mental effort that we purchase, or borrow, his book, and afterward discuss it.

Hence arises our heartfelt gratitude toward such novels as deal with "vital" themes, with the questions we average novel-readers confront or make talk about in those happier hours of our existence wherein we are not reduced to reading. For a tale which deals with equal suffrage, say, or eugenics, or "white slavery,"—or with the divorce habit, or with the probable benefits of converting clergymen to Christianity, or with how much more than she knows a desirable mother will tell her children,—finds the book's tentative explorer, just now, amply equipped with prejudices, whether acquired by second thought or second hand, concerning the book's topic. As endurance goes, reading the book rises forthwith almost to the level of an afternoon

call where there is gossip about the neighbors. We average novel-readers may not, in either case, agree with the opinions advanced; but at least our prejudices are aroused, and we are interested.

And these "vital" themes awake our prejudices at the cost of a minimum—if not always, as when Miss Corelli guides us, with a positively negligible—tasking of our mental faculties. For such exemption we average novel-readers cannot but be properly grateful. Nay, more than this: provided the novelist contrives to rouse our prejudices, it matters with us not at all whether afterward they be soothed or harrowed. To implicate our prejudices somehow, to raise in us a partisan interest in the tale's progress, is our sole request. Whether this consummation be brought through an arraignment of some social condition which we personally either advocate or reprehend,—the attitude weighs little,—or whether this interest be purchased with placidly drivelling preachments of generally "uplifting" tendencies,—vaguely titillating that vague intention which exists in us all of becoming immaculate as soon as it is perfectly convenient,—the personal prejudices of us average novel-readers are not lightly lulled again to sleep.

In fact, the jealousy of any human prejudice against hinted encroachment may safely be depended upon to spur us through an astonishing number of pages, for all that it has of late been complained among us, with some show of extenuation, that our original intent in beginning certain of the recent "vital" novels was to kill time, rather than eternity. And so, we average novel-readers plod on jealously to the end, whether we advance (to cite examples already somewhat of yesterday) under the leadership of Mr. Upton Sinclair aspersing the integrity of modern sausages and millionaires, or of Mr. Hall Caine saying about Roman Catholics what ordinary people would hesitate to impute to their relatives by marriage,—or whether we be more suavely allured onward by Miss Florence Barclay, or Mr. Sydnor Harrison, with ingenuous endorsements of the New Testament.

The "vital" theme, then, let it be repeated, has two inestimable advantages which should commend it to all novelists:

first, it spares us average novel-readers any preliminary orientation, and thereby mitigates the mental exertion of reading; and secondly, it appeals to our prejudices, which we naturally prefer to exercise, and are accustomed to exercise, rather than our mental or idealistic faculties. The novelist who conscientiously bears these two facts in mind is reasonably sure of his reward, not merely in pecuniary form, but in those higher fields wherein he harvests his chosen public's honest gratitude and affection. For we average novel-readers are quite frequently reduced by circumstances to self-entrustment to the resources of the novelist, as to those of the dentist. Our latter-day conditions, as we cannot but recognize, necessitate the employment of both artists upon occasion. And with both, we average novel-readers, we average people, are most grateful when they make the process of resorting to them as easy and unirritating as may be possible.

So much for the plea of us average novel-readers; and our plea, we think, is rational. We are "in the market" for a specified article; and human ingenuity, coöperating with human nature, will inevitably insure the manufacture of that article as long as any general demand for it endures.

Meanwhile, it is small cause for grief that the purchaser of American novels prefers Central Park to any "wood near Athens," and is more at home in the Tenderloin than in Camelot. People whose tastes happen to be literary are entirely too prone to too much long-faced prattle about literature which, when all is said, is never a controlling factor in anybody's life. The automobile and the telephone, the accomplishments of Mr. Edison and Mr. Burbank, and it would be permissible to add of Mr. Rockefeller, influence nowadays, in one fashion or another, every moment of every living American's existence; whereas had America produced, instead, a second Milton or a Dante, it would at most have caused a few of us to spend a few spare evenings rather differently.

Besides, we know—even we average novel-readers—that America is in fact producing her enduring literature day by day, although, as rarely fails to be the case, those who are contemporaneous with the makers of this literature cannot with any



certainly point them out. To voice a hoary truism, time alone is the test of "vitality." In our present flood of books, as in any other flood, it is the froth and scum which shows most prominently. And the possession of "vitality," here as elsewhere, postulates that its possessor must ultimately perish. Nay, by the time these printed pages are first read as printed pages, allusion to those modern authors whom these pages cite—the preëminent literary figures of that hour wherein these pages were written—may possibly have come to savor somewhat of antiquity; and sundry references herein to the "vital" books now most in vogue may rouse much that vague shrugging recollection as wakens now at a mention of *Dorothy Vernon* or *Three Weeks* or *Beverly of Graustark*. And this is as it should be. *Tout passe.—L'art robust seul a l'éternité*, precisely as Gautier points out with bracing common-sense: and it is excellent thus to comprehend that to-day, as always, only through exercise of the auctorial virtues of distinction and clarity and beauty, of tenderness and truth and urbanity, may a man reasonably attempt to insure his books against oblivion's voracity.

Yet the desire to write perfectly of beautiful happenings is, as the saying runs, old as the hills—and as immortal. Questionless, there was many a serviceable brick wasted in Nineveh because finicky persons must needs be deleting here and there a phrase in favor of its cuneatic synonym; and it is not improbable that when the outworn sun expires in clinkers its final ray will gild such zealots tinkering with their "style." This, then, is the conclusion of the whole matter. Some few there must be in every age and every land of whom life claims nothing very insistently save that they write perfectly of beautiful happenings. And it is such folk, we know,—even we average novel-readers,—who are to-day making in America that portion of our literature which may hope for permanency.

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