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THE ART OF THE NOVEL

Dr. Ibrahim Shalabi, *Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Hail, Hail, Saudi Arabia*

Abstract:

It is contented in the paper that although all art is a good art, yet to make it a great art there must be a vision, a life- pattern breathed into the novel. This vision enhances, ennobles and elevates not only the life it represents, but also the quality of work it is implied in. Yet the novel is no sermon, it should preach through percept and not by being openly didactic or propagandist. How this neat balance is maintained makes the novel an art.

Key Words: *Novel, art, life-pattern, preach.*

I am not unmindful of the possibility of a score of accusing fingers pointing at the alleged error implied in the title of this essay, viz. regarding novel writing as an art .And this, in spite of Percy Lubbock's The Craft of Fiction, Edgar Pelham's The Art of The Novel, Henry James's The Art of Fiction and Somerset Maugham's essay also entitled The Art of Fiction. I imagine my possible critics rallying on their side the great authority of Virginia Woolf who wrote in The Nation:

A novel, in particular, has roused a thousand ordinary human feelings in its progress. To drag in art in such a connection seems priggish and cold hearted ……. There is not a critic alive now who will say that a novel is a work of art and that as such he will judge it.

To answer this would mean covering familiar grounds. I can only refer the reader to what R.A. Scott-James has written in his famous essay The Novel (1) where he declares:

> In spite of Mrs. Wolf's terrible threat, there are critics who still live to say that a novel is a work of art, just as there are many novelists, of whom she is one, who openly pursue it with none but an artistic end.

Mr. Forster says "Yes oh dear yes the novel tells a story"(P.75). And it is here that the relevance or otherwise of treating novel- writing as an art assumes point. For even though story-telling may be as ancient a practice as mankind, it has not ceased being inherently a difficult exercise, a skillful practice an Art.

This perfectly fits in with the definition of art as given in the Oxford Dictionary:

> The application of skill to objects of taste, as poetry, music, dancing, the drama, oratory, literary composition; and the like. Especially in modern use skill displaying itself in perfection of workmanship, perfection of execution as an object in itself. (3)

"Skill displaying itself in perfection"---that necessarily means, or at least should mean, a kind of dexterity aiming at and striving for, with greater or less degree of success, "perfection of workmanship, perfection of execution., Perfection is the end and not the actual achievement. Or, else, it will not be perfection in relation to the finite abilities of and possibilities open to man. It will be a good art to the extent to which the skill approximates its end of perfection. To this and other related problems we shall return presently. However, before passing on to other considerations let us examine another attack on the belief that the novel is a form of art. It comes from Sir Desmond McCarthy (4) who pointed out that;

> It is tenable that one of the mistakes of late nineteenth- century and early twentieth-Century criticism has been to regard the novel ' a work of art' in the same sense that a Sonata, a picture, or a poem is a work of art. It is extremely doubtful whether the aim of The novel is to make an aesthetic appeal. Passages in it may be do so ; but aims also at satisfying our curiosity about life, as much as satisfying the aesthetic sense…I am inclined myself to regard it as a bastard form of art, rightly concerned with many human interests which the maker of beautiful things must eschew.

This is, as far as, one can go in denying the character of an art to the novel. And yet the logic behind the above attack is as perverse as anything can be. Besides the false opposition Sir Desmond makes between the aesthetic appeal and the satisfaction of our curiosity about life, he displays a woeful lack of understanding of the true character of the novel as a literary composition. What is worse, he completely distorts the meaning of what he terms 'an aesthetic appeal.' A novel besides being the interpretation of human life by means of fictitious narrative in prose is also a symbolic expression of its author's vision or view of a certain human situation. Now symbolization is the artist's business and a work which embodies such symbolization is undeniably a piece of art.

One sense what a novelist seeks to give in a truly great novel is not much different from what a poet aims at expressing through the subtler and more rarefied medium of poetry. More expanses can be no bar to the creation of an art-form. Its pleasures may be diffused and may lack the trenchancy of concentrated effects. It may even put a greater strain on the reader's sympathy-in terms of the qualities of suddenness, depth and resulting from a vagueness of appeal and obscurity of meaning. But what the novel loses on account of its expansiveness is more than what it makes in the form of a more sustained, varied and enduring appeal. Moreover, it requires a much greater and more difficult skill to compose a literary work on such a vast scale and to inform it with a sense of form and design than to do the same in the case of a poem. The very size of the canvas presents a challenge which can be answered successfully only by one possessing a superior skill. The novel therefore is the most artistic for this.

Another fallacy of Sir Desmond is to give a very narrow and even a partial signification to aesthetic pleasure. Our aesthetic sense is not just a bundle of physically and intellectually pleasing stimuli devoid of all philosophical, ethical and even socially useful substance. When we speak of 'aesthetic pleasure' we imply a complex of feelings the totality of which gives a certain delight at once satisfying to our sense of outer form as well as to that of inner or intrinsic rightness. Moral integrity of an artist's vision when expressed through a formally correct medium gives an abiding sense of satisfaction to a healthy taste. It would be more appropriate to call this satisfaction aesthetic joy instead of aesthetic pleasure.

Anyone who affirms this quality of giving aesthetic joy in the case of a 'sonata' a picture, or a poem while denying it in relation to a novel betrays a most erroneous appreciation of the novel as a literary form and of the true nature of our aesthetic sense. For the novel, no less than poetry, is 'a criticism of life' and the greatness of both lies in the noble and profound application of ideas to life. As such the many human interests which the maker of beautiful things must eschew do no more make of the novel, 'a bastard form of art' than the ideas on man, on nature, and on human life would make of poetry 'a bastard form of art. Hence, let us say of the novel with Percy Lubbock that "an art it must be, since a literal transcript of life is plainly impossible. The laws of art, therefore, apply to this object of our scrutiny, this novel, and it is better, other things being equal, for obeying them". (4) Poor Sir Desmond! Unfortunately for him the odds in this case are heavily against him. Try howsoever he may but the sophistication of language cannot succeed in driving a wedge between a novelist and a poet. Not only do the two have a common origin-and this cannot be dismissed as a more coincidence-they share a common heritage and a common destiny. Their art forms may be different; their motivations are not dissimilar. Only their media are different. Their r approach to life, their sensuous apprehensions, their interpretation in terms of significant symbol, may be different in

degree; but they are the same in kind. That kind is the presentation of life through images. (5)

The art of the novel may be approached in two different ways. We may look upon it strictly in an analytical manner, naming and describing the various constituents or essentials which good technique and craftsmanship knit into a concrete whole. Or, we may take the novel as a finished work of art and then proceed to examine its title to greatness by applying a set of objectives aesthetic and moral standards to it. The former approach has the danger of degenerating into a mere pigeon holding or cataloguing process. The latter is bound to generate a heated controversy on the validity of the criteria applied to adjust the novel and the very sanction behind these objective standards may be questioned. Further, the first approach is bound to result in a kind of atomistic one-sidedness in which one sees and even counts the trees but misses the wood altogether .Thus if we assess a novel in the light of its particular qualities of "character", "plot" , " dialogue" , "narrative" and "background", we can boast of having performed a scientific dissection of the work , but by this very act of dissection we cause the death of "the art of the novel" which consists in the artistic unity, the life-pattern or the vision breathed in the work as a whole by its author . That's why Henry James questions the propriety of evaluating a novel in terms of its particular qualities. In his An Introduction to the English Novel, Arnold Kettle quotes aptly quotes Henry James views on the novel:

> People often talk of these things as if they had a kind of internecine distinctness, instead of melting into each other at every breath, and being intimately connected parts of one general effort of expression. I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks, nor conceive, In any novel worth discussing at all, of a passage of description that is not in its intention narrative, a passage of dialogue that is not in its intention description, a touch of truth of any sort that does not partake of the nature of incident, or an incident that derives its interest from any other source than the general and only source of the success of a work of art that of being illustrative. A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of the other parts . (6)

Therefore, we shall adopt the latter approach and discuss at some length what constitutes greatness in a novel, even at the risk of being charged with the adaptation of arbitrary standards. But before embarking upon the exploration and enunciation of these "first principles" of the art of the novel, it would be worthwhile to elaborate the phrase 'life- pattern' used in this essay earlier.

The word 'pattern' has been used in a variety of meanings. Pelham, for example speaks of the presence of carefully patterned design as one of the factors of romance. By this he means that in such a design incidents are dovetailed, characters are grooved and that there is an irresistible movement of action towards the inevitable conclusion.

These features are distinguished from simulation of the haphazard incongruity and inconclusiveness of life in a realistic depiction of life. Again, Robert Liddell discusses the plot as a pre-existing pattern to which novelists work. (7).

My use of 'life- pattern' is akin to the sense given to the word 'pattern' by Arnold Kettle (8) whereby it he means 'significance.' .The qualitative weight and importance, not mere utility, of what is said about life - it is this which constitutes the element of pattern in a novel as a successful work of art. New thought Arnold Kettle makes distinction between 'life' and 'pattern' as the two necessary elements in all novels which are artistically of high order of excellence, he avers in conclusion. 'Life and pattern are not, in truth, separable. Pattern is the way life develops.'

Thus the Life -pattern breathed in the work as a whole is the quality, of human interest as viewed, felt and experienced by the novelist and given a shape, a meaning, and significance by and according to his vision or moral and philosophical outlook on life and the world.

The 'life pattern' can never be a moral. It can never be neutral between the right and wrong without being openly didactic, it cannot but have definite implications necessarily of moral nature in its broadest sense. Any literary theory which advocates moral apathy under the slogan of objectivity in art and 'art for art's sake' is fraught with pernicious consequences.

Now it is easier for us to discuss the prime question: What constitutes greatness in a given novelfi

The greatness of a work of art cannot be left at the mercy of oscillations of literary fashion, nor can it be measured in terms of pre-conceived critical formula. Yet we all know that it is not impossible to call such a novel great even though it may not always be easy to explain why it is so. Again, even if we are able to formulate the reasons why we regard a particular novel as great, there is no certainty that the same set of reasons will necessarily be applicable to another novel also considered great by usfi

The better truth is that in matters aesthetic formulistic judgments and cut and dried assessments are both difficult and undesirable. Then there is the question of relative greatness. To take an example, between *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, the judgment as to which is greater of the two novels is bound to vary from man to man. Merely academic reasons of better construction, more powerful and convincing characters and situations cannot ipso facto put *Anna Karenina* in a higher place than the other novel has been infinitely far more popular a novel than *Anna Karenina.*

Again, the application of different formulae will focus light on different sets of novels competing for greatness. Thus, if the test is a plot of spiritual significance, hypothetical and/ or didactic situations and characters of super-human dimensions, *Crime and Punishment*, *Wuthering Heights and Tess of the D'Urbervilles* may qualify. If it is plot of an integrated and coherent pattern, life- like situations and realistic characters, our choice fall on *Anna Karenina*, *Madam Bovary* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Yet all literary and critical formulae are good servants but bad masters. Moreover, in any artistic judgment however conscientious and honest, there are bound to be subjective undertones. All this renders the task of judging a novel as great all the more difficult.

Are we then to give up our quest of what makes a novel great in sheer despair as hopeless taskfiAll the countless difficulties notwithstanding, I think the situation is not bad.

The first and most decisive thing which determines the greatest novel is the presence in it of what Pater (9) termed 'something of the soul of humanity! '. The distinction made by him between good art and great art is of the greatest relevance here. The greatness of a novel cannot be assessed merely in terms of formal and technical excellences. As Pater illuminated:

> …. the distinction between great art and good art depending immediately, as Regards literature at all events not on its form , but on the matter. Thackeray's *Esmond*, surely, is a greater art than *Vanity Fair*, by the greater dignity Of its interests. It is on the quality of the matter it informs or controls, its variety, Its revolt ,or the largeness of hope in it, that the greatness of literary art depends, as *The Divine Comedy* , *Paradise Lost*, *Less Miserable* , *The English Bible* are great art,…if it be devoted further to the increase of men's happiness, to the redemption of the oppressed, or the enlargement of our sympathies with each other, or to such presentment of new or old truth about ourselves and our relation to the world as may ennoble and fortify us in our sojourn here, or immediately, as with Dante to the glory of God , it will be also great art.

I have quoted Pater at such length because he has clenched the issue with great force and without ambiguity. Mere verbal polish and stylistic elegance cannot make a novel great. We may or may not agree with Longinus when he says "thought and language in literature are for the most part interfolded each in the other "(10) and "for beautiful words are the true and peculiar light of the word." (11) But the fact remains

that there can be no great novel without having great mind behind it. And imperfections of language and style have no power to detract from the greatness of a work.

Flaubert, writing of the great authors of the world had this to say:

> They had no need to strive for style, they are strong in spite of all faults and because of them; but we, the minor ones, only count by our perfection of execution …..I will venture a suggestion here I would not dare to make anywhere else. It is that the very great often. Write very badly and so much the better for them. We must not look for the art of Form in them, but in the second raters like Horace and La Bruyere." (12)

So without a great mind one may conceivably produce a good novel but never a great one. A great novel must reflect life's many sidedness as well as its intensity and passion. It must have breadth as well as depth. Even where there is faulty plot- construction but if it is redeemed by an intense awareness of life in all its richness and dynamism, we can have a great novel. Many of Dostoevsky's novels are great because of the presence in them of the above qualities even though they are almost formless. Despite the weakness in its characterization, the novels of Balzac and Victor Hugo are great works of art due to the comprehensiveness and passion embodied in them. Without the qualities of vitality, passion and human interest, without something of the soul of humanity, no novel can belong to the realm of great art. Now despite so many excellences of Boris Pasternak's Dr. Zhivago, despite the nobility of its concealed message, it cannot be regarded as a great novel for the simple reason that it lacks the qualities of breadth, vitality and dynamism. It needs no prophet to foresee that the erosions of time would leave Dr.Zhivago shorn of its entire topical splendor at least to the extent of denying its title of a classic. Milan Kundera has rightly summed up the idea of the novel by saying: "The novel's spirit is the spirit of complexity. . . . The novel's spirit is the spirit of continuity . . . a thing made to last, to connect the past with the future."

Conclusion:

To conclude this paper, I may repeat what I said earlier, that it is the life-pattern or the vision breathed in the novel as a whole which primarily constitutes its greatness. A severe and unobtrusive life-pattern has the quality of enhancing ennobling and elevating life. It adds something extra-dimensional to our sense of life. It broadens our sympathies, enlarges our vision and reinforces our faith in the infinite possibilities of human endeavor and achievement. Man is seen emerging greater than all the difficulties he endures. He may actually prove victorious. But his will is shown at once defiant and therefore triumphant in the promise it holds out. A great novel can and must do all this without being openly didactic or propagandist. And therein lies the art of the novel.

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