

THE FUTURE OF THE NOVEL

By VICENTE BLASCO IBANEZ

WITHOUT any doubt whatever, the novel is the most important and characteristic literary manifestation of modern life. The novelist, to be sure, rarely enjoys such noisy triumphs as the dramatist. In two or three hours the author of a play may see himself transported from obscurity to glory. Especially in Europe, a single performance of a comedy or a "drama" may set a whole nation talking for a week or a month. Sometimes a play is fortunate enough to keep in the public eye for one, two or even three years. But at this point the advantages of the dramatist come to an end. A sort of tunnel, a tunnel of forgetfulness as it were, opens at the end of every dramatic "run." Into this tunnel all plays, however brilliant their careers, ultimately make their way; and only the masterpiece, the exceptional production, succeeds in reappearing at the other end—years, perhaps generations, afterward.

The life of a novel, if much less brilliant, is infinitely longer. Our bookstores are still selling as "fresh goods" novels which were written 80, 90, 100 years ago, and which attracted scarcely any attention at the time of their publication. These books have progressed slowly, but always in the right direction, their popularity growing like a rolling snowball in the course of the years.

The novel is an original creation of modern literature. When historians of the future ask what we, the intellectual offspring of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have contributed to the development of art, we may answer proudly: music and the novel. No one will venture to question that claim.

Music is an invention of our age. Of course there has always been music; but real music, the art of producing psychological effects by sound, belongs to our epoch and is one of our great achievements. For hardly more than a century and a quarter has profane "popular" music been clearly distinguishable from religious ceremony; and in that brief period

of time it has attained an eminence, an excellence, which really seems insuperable.

We may say the same of the novel. We find novels, to be sure, in the various periods of history, but always

Apuleius we find the ancient prototype of the "occult" romance. The Middle Ages had their tales of chivalry, just as the Arabs had their stories of the "marvelous." All such works may doubtless be called

great, the "only," novel! It is only at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth that we get novels of the type so popular today.

I am sure that only an out and

literature. Any barbarian has his lyric poetry. Countries less barbarous have their epics. With the dawn of the theatre we have the dawn of civilization. But only when community life has become something rich, deep, complex, does the novel appear as a synthesis of all the literary types that came into being before it. The novel is at once an epic and a lyric. It covers the ground of comedy, tragedy, and all that lies between them. The novel, in a word, is life itself.

The novel needs a large reading public; and therefore presupposes a high grade of popular culture. The essence of the theatre is action; that of poetry, rhythm—things that even illiterates can take a certain pleasure in. The troubadour of Provence could hold a multitude of peasants spellbound with the sheer beauty of sound. The audience that attended the plays of Shakespeare, of Lope de Vega, and Calderon, though few individuals in them could read, or at least did read, were deeply stirred by the sight of heroes acting on the stage. You can be a hero without having been to school.

We needed democracy, the modern nation with compulsory education, a public able and accustomed to read, for the novel to become that important and influential thing it is in life today. All the great movements of thought that have characterized the recent "age of revolution" have used the novel as their medium of expression. The philosopher Rousseau turned novelist to market his ideas on education and love. Chateaubriand used the novel to exalt the Catholic restoration in the face of Napoleon. Think what a magnificent poet Victor Hugo was! But he relied on the novel when it came to giving his democratic, humanitarian ideas as great a diffusion as possible. Dickens and Tolstoy ascended the pulpit of the novel to preach their sermons on humility and loving kindness. In some cases, even, novels have been as distinctly "public events" as is more often the case with theatrical first nights. Certainly the appearance of Hugo's



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as mere episodes in literature, without any trace of the mastery, the productive energy that the novel shows in our own time. Ancient Rome had a novel, a novel of morals—bad morals—the "Satyricon" of Petronius. In "The Golden Ass" of

novels, but they are not our out "primitive" novel. At a venture, we may find some traces of our modern novel in the stories of Boccaccio; though, personally, I never feel quite on familiar ground until I get down to the "Don Quixote" of Cervantes—for me the

its superiority to all other kinds of novel the least human of the literary genres, because it has been the last to develop in the literature of all countries. For my part, I think the late development of the novel shows its superiority to all other kinds of

"Les Misérables" was as much of a sensation as the famous openings of his "Hernani" and of Rostand's "Cyrano." I remember as a boy that the publication of a novel by Zola was attended in Europe by veritable explosions of wrath and joy—by street riots and social battles.

This is the age of the airplane, the wireless telegraph, of radium, of "relativity." Very well! It is also the age of the novel. Perhaps the future will create a new literary genre such as no one can at present foresee, but for the moment the novel is the summary of modern life; and when people ask what the literature of the coming years is going to be, the question they really ask is: What kind of a novel is the public going to read?

In Western civilization the novel plays the part that opium is supposed to play in the life of the East. We need to dream, to create a world of fancy more in harmony with our heart's desire. Just as the Oriental picks up his opium pipe, so the Westerner picks up his novel, to live for a few hours in an imaginary world, where he can escape from the commonplace, annoying occupations of routine life.

Theoretically the novel answering this demand can have any one of numberless forms; but these forms will approximate one or the other of two extremes.

Benjamin Constant, in his "Adolphe," fixed the mold of the psychological novel, the novel where nothing happens, where everything relates to the mental complications of the hero. In contrast to this, we have the so-called novel in action, the story of adventure—a type, this, which has existed in every age and is now going through a period of vigorous rebirth—where something happens on every page—murders, robberies, conflagrations, wars, duels, what not. In one chapter a character dies, and he comes to life in the next. The hero of the novel of action has nine lives like a cat; and the rougher you treat him the tougher he grows.

In this novel of adventure, the movie film, the thriller in three, four, or a dozen parts, finds its inexhaustible gold mine.

I select these two types—the novel where nothing happens and the novel where everything happens—as the extremes between which public taste is always vibrating. Fashions in literature work very much as they do in matters of dress. When you see girls trotting along on the sidewalks in skirts so tight that they can hardly move their feet, the discerning critic is able to predict that within four years those same girls will be striding along in umbrella petticoats and balloon sleeves. You can say the same of the opera hats that men wear. Today it is the tall narrow crown and the curling brim; tomorrow the broad, flat crown and the wide brim. The astute man will in all these cases choose something midway between the two extremes. He will never be really "fashionable," really "dressy"; but his wardrobe will never die on his hands.

Transporting this analogy into the field of the novel, we may liken Balzac, or Dickens, or Victor Hugo, to this astute middle-of-the-road man. Our great classics have been, on the whole, writers who found a balance between what we in Europe call "interest"—the distinctive trait of the novel of adventure—and placid, studious observation of character and environment. If they are never in top style, they are never out of style.

The desire to attract huge numbers of readers has been responsible, I suppose, for our mad pursuit of "interest" at the expense of all other things. The real master of this extreme style in literary dress was the elder Dumas, who has exerted a great, and I believe pernicious, influence on the literature of all countries. Dumas is the type of the "interesting" novelist—the author entirely fascinated by "plot," who takes all manner of liberties with history and swallows the most absurd improbabilities with all seriousness and good faith. I dare say that some of the novels of Dumas will attain immortality because they are so perfect in this imperfect

style, and, indeed, it would be so bad if all our "interesting" writers had the genius of Dumas. But that, of course, could not be expected. In "Ponson du Terrail" we saw the limits to which the search for "interest" may go.

It was by a reaction against Dumas and all that Dumas stood for that we got the great "naturalists," Flaubert, Zola, Daudet, the Goncourt brothers, Maupassant, and so on. But with such again we pass to an extreme, the extreme of sobriety and reserve. The "naturalists" relegated "interest" to a minor rôle in their work. With them to be called "interesting" was almost an insult. They stressed psychology, environment, landscape, the "human document," keeping as far as possible from the manner of what they called disparagingly the "feuilleton," the "pot-boiler" style. In their hands life became something gray, sad, monotonous, something approaching what life actually seemed to be for the majority of ordinary people. Their aim was to produce in their works the crushing, oppressive effect that existence, normally devoid of anything spectacular, of anything interesting, made upon the generation just past. And much as the followers of Dumas copied and exaggerated his defects—Theophile Gautier said that "flies always make for the specks on an apple"—so the mediocre imitators of the naturalists, in steering clear of "interest," gave us books that cannot be read for the leaden dullness with which they are conceived. The purpose of the naturalistic novel

of time is to reproduce reality. In it nothing ever happens. There is no "plot." Our European "Main Street" is a work by a disciple of Zola's, whose name I need not mention. There the novelist is determined to say nothing that does not smack of the monotony of life. He shows a poor, middle-class family in Paris going out for a Sunday afternoon walk. The novel is a narrative of all they saw on the streets. Finally a shower comes on. The poor wretches go to a café and spend a very tiresome evening. Then they go home. It takes 300 pages to tell all that.

In setting up this contrast between the novel of action and the psychological, realistic novel, I have intentionally left the symbolists aside. The symbolistic novel has not produced any work of really great importance. Perhaps idiosyncrasies of language in all these authors were principally responsible for that. I was never able to read even Paul Adam, the best writer of the symbolistic group, without spending as much time on the dictionary as on his books. I do not think the symbolists ever found by theory the compromise between "interest" and "realism" which the great masters, the classics I have mentioned, found by instinct.

Which of these two types will the novel of the future—I am speaking particularly of the European novel—approach? Will we have more and more realism, as the tendency seemed to be in 1914? Or will we turn back to the old novel of adventure, of action?

I have never felt any particular calling to this prophet business. I have noticed, for instance, that those critics who are prophesying a reaction toward mysticism in letters, an increased exploitation of religious sentiment, are usually men of reactionary ideas in politics. They are predicting a return to mysticism because they are anxious to see a return to old-fashioned ideas in sociology. We are all inclined to prophesy the advent of what we want most.

There is a curious thing, however, about public taste. Things seem to go by contrasts. The terrorists of the French Revolution developed the philanthropic, the sentimental novel particularly. They went mad over the humanitarianism of Rousseau and the pastoral delicacies of Florian. On the other hand, the home-loving bourgeoisie, the inoffensive shop-keepers who were in control under Louis Philippe—people who were too gentle and timid to kill a fly, and who invented the nightcap to keep off drafts in bed—went wild over "The Three Musketeers" and the ferocious blood-and-thunder tale. This was also the golden age of the melodrama, when the torture chamber, capital punishment and the most hair-raising cruelties were commonly portrayed on the stage.

I have never thought that the general effect of the war would be to turn literature into channels of mysticism. The only thing I have always regarded as certain was that, as a consequence, not of the war but of the conditions in which the novel found itself in 1914, our writers

would have to make very large concessions to what I have been calling "interest." Even had the world continued living in peace, we should have had to do something to remedy the conditions into which the novel had fallen through the exaggeration of naturalistic tendencies.

This feeling of mine seems to be justified by the present trend of things. The novel of adventure is becoming fashionable again in Europe. Not only are publishers accepting new books of this kind, but they are reprinting many stories that were written a generation ago, but had no success at that time—the heyday of the naturalists.

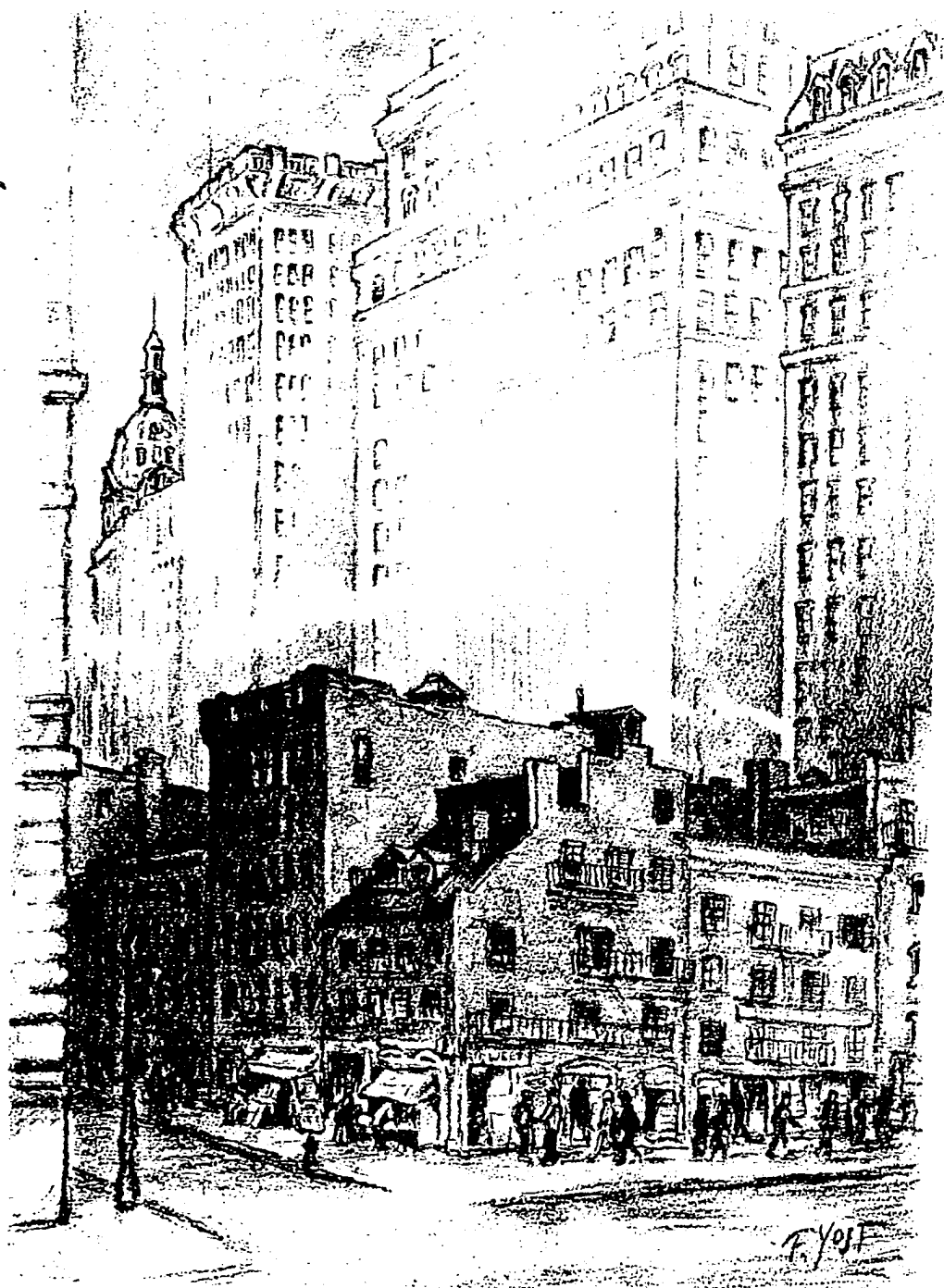
Peculiarly interesting, for instance, is the new vogue of Robert Louis Stevenson. The Continentals who had read "Treasure Island" in the years following the publication of that masterpiece of adventure could be counted almost on the fingers of the hand. Now Stevenson is all the rage. Publishers are issuing not only his novels and short stories, but his books of travel and even collections of his newspaper articles. With Stevenson, a whole group of English detective stories, novels of adventure, novels of action, are being taken over. In native books of this kind, Continental authors seem to be feeling still the influence of the old naturalists. They are not forgetting character; they are not forgetting environment. It is doubtful, however, whether this restraint will be long maintained. "Interest" is an engaging, a seductive, thing. It will be hard for our young men to devote themselves to it without eventually sacrificing the other elements that give a novel literary quality. If they fall into this error, we may soon expect another reaction against "interest."

In reality, the novelist needs many things in addition to inventive skill; he must know how to write; he must be a psychologist; he must be a painter of exteriors. Without these attainments, he can never produce a great work of art. On the other hand, a novel without a certain amount of "interest" cannot succeed. The mistake of the writers of the past generation was to despise "plot," action, "interest," believing that a book actually as monotonous, as calm, as unexciting, as ordinary life would be readable. That mistake was natural. I remember vividly what Europe was like in the years before 1914. Years and years would go by and you would see the same people round you, all doing the same things and doing them always in the same way. There were no very great catastrophes. Fortunes and social hierarchies seemed to be as fixed, as immutable, as a block of crystal. The man who was born rich died rich, and the man who was poor died poor. I remember that my friends used to say to me, "What a bore all this is! Life in Europe is about as exciting as a funeral." The naturalistic novel reflected the spirit of those times. The dramatic novel, where people die, kill and steal; where fortunes are made or lost overnight; where beggars become millionaires in a year or two, seemed something fantastic, something detached from reality, something unworthy of consideration from intelligent people.

The war has changed all that. More things happened in a week during the war years than in a century of the old kind of life. People without fortunes have become rich. New hopes, new possibilities, have opened out before thousands and thousands of young men. On the other hand, people famous for their wealth and power—think, for instance, of the Russian nobility, which was always conspicuous for its luxury and its brilliancy—have fallen to the depths. The war has upset the equilibrium of Europe. Life seems to be in flux again. Everything now is possible.

The faithful reflection of this condition, the expression of the new European mood, is again the novel of adventure, which is the truly "naturalistic" novel of the present, the novel that best reproduces the reality before our eyes. And so it will be, for some time.

OLD NEW YORK AND THE NEW



Drawn by F. Yost.

A View From the Battery.