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A CROSS SECTION OF CURRENT FICTION

by *BEN RAY REDMAN*

THE novel, from its beginnings, has been a growing, explorative, increasingly comprehensive form of literature. From the forthright factualism of Defoe to the psychological and social subtleties of Henry James, from the sentimentality of Richardson to the naturalism of Zola, from the robust and public simplicity of Fielding to the private complexity of James Joyce, from the romantic eloquence of Walter Scott to the symbolical eloquence of Franz Kafka, the novel has steadily taken in more and more human territory.

Indeed, it has so extended itself, it has sought to encompass so many kinds of experience, and has translated life into literature in so many different ways, that critics have from time to time despaired of its being

able to maintain its identity. A form into which so much heterogeneous material is thrust, they have argued, must surely disintegrate under pressure. A form that is asked to serve so many purposes — poetic, psychological, scientific, sociological, political, economic, religious, controversial, propagandist, biographical, and historical, not to mention the ancient and honorable purpose of entertainment — must surely end by serving none well. Or, at least, we cannot continue to call this multi-functional form by a single name. Let us admit the fact of fission, and agree on new classifications.

Yet the novel remains the novel, and it remains in excellent health. Of course, there are critics who will tell you that it is far from thriving, that we need only look back to its earlier stages to see how perceptibly it has shrunk in stature and importance. There are always such critics, and they always ignore facts that no

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one should ignore. The first of these facts is that great writers, including novelists, have always been rarities. The second is that guaranteed, genuine literary masterpieces require for their authoritative recognition, if not for their existence, the collaboration of more than one generation of readers.

Whether there are among us today novels which are masterpieces in the making, we cannot be sure. If there are, they are doubtless even less easily visible than they would have been in some earlier eras, because of the mass of mediocre fiction now being produced. But this mass should not blind us to the remarkable amount of good work that is being done in the novel form; and it is a fair risk, I think, to wager that posterity will find at least a few items of this work better than good. Our present concern, however, is not with potential masterpieces, but with several recent novels of several different and representative kinds. Taken together, they compose a cross section — one of many possible cross sections — of the novel as it exists today.

In the course of its recent expansion, the novel has concerned itself more and more with unfolding events of national and international politics. This is not an entirely new development, but the extent of this concern and the intensity of the novelist's intellectual and emotional involvement in his subject matter are new. Political novels we have had before, among them the amusing parliamentary tales of Trollope and the florid histories of

Disraeli. But a world lies between these and the fiction of such men as Malraux, Silone, and Koestler.

During the 1930s we were bombarded with what have been called "dramas of Bolshevik piety," and since the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 we have been treated to numerous fictional acts of recantation. These Stalinist and anti-Stalinist novels belong to the general class of timely fiction, and some of them belong to a group within that class — a group which may be defined by an adjective borrowed from another literary province.

We have long been familiar with "occasional" poems, but of late there has been an unprecedented boom in what may be called the occasional novel. This boom has given us novels inspired by Russia's five-year plans, the Chinese revolution, the Moscow trials, the Spanish civil war, the fall of France, the Nazi occupation of Norway, and the American occupation of Italy, to mention only a few "occasions." It will doubtless give us much more fiction of the same kind, for the type has been popular and the material is ready at hand to be seized upon by anyone who cares to do the seizing. Best of all, this material affords the novelist a certain immediate advantage which no shrewd writer could fail to recognize. But it also poses dangers which more than one shrewd novelist has failed to avoid.

The immediate advantage of the occasional novel, from the author's point of view, is that from the very

first paragraph he can count with considerable certainty upon the intellectual and emotional collaboration of his readers. The authors of *Tom Jones*, *Eugénie Grandet*, *Resurrection*, and *The Magic Mountain* — to select four examples from hundreds of candidates — had to win their readers' interest, sometimes gradually, by virtue of literary art; but the man of our time who picks up a novel that is *about* Nazi terrorism in Central Europe, or *about* United States Marines on Guadalcanal, is already interested; more than that, he is probably already a partisan ready and eager to participate imaginatively in the story's action. According to baseball measurements, the author is on first base before he has to start running. So much for the advantage. What of the danger?

The danger is that the novelist may be so pleased by the innate and immediate potency of his raw material that he will overlook the artistic obligation of transmuting it into literature. He is in danger of acting as a mere purveyor rather than as a creator; of being content with a good, or even bad, journalistic job. Whatever popular success he may win, he will fail as a novelist if he fails to subject his material to the discipline of his chosen medium. He will succeed if his material is made to serve, rather than substitute for, a novelist's intention; if it is made to express a novelist's conception or vision.

In *Darkness at Noon*, in my opinion, Arthur Koestler enjoyed the advantage offered by the occasional novel,

and avoided its traps. Taking the subject of the Moscow trials, a subject which fascinated and puzzled the world, he offered, in fictional terms, his explanation of the confessions evoked by those trials. His explanation was a novel — dominated by a fully realized character — which had its own created reality, density, depth and inner harmony. His raw material was completely absorbed by the living tissue of his fiction.

II

Mr. Koestler's new novel, *Thieves in the Night*,¹ presents an interesting contrast. Here there is no absorption. The novelist furnishes the journalist with a collection of serviceable types and tested situations, teaches him a few simple narrative tricks, and then stands aside to let the journalist have his way. It is an effective way. The book that it produces is engrossing and exciting. But not because it is a good novel. History, skillfully manipulated, does the job.

It is as though Mr. Koestler said: "You are interested in 'the Palestine situation'? You are disturbed by it, perhaps puzzled? Very well. I shall tell you a story, a story that will explain to you what it meant to be a Jew in Palestine from 1937 to 1939; a Jew trying to build a home upon land that was his by right of promises and purchase, but that had to be won and held against Arab violence and British betrayal. Listen to this story,

¹ \$2.75. Macmillan.

and you will be able to read your daily paper in the light of it. Listen, and you will be able to understand the 'crimes' of the Jewish underground. You will know what the issues are, and how irremediably the battle has been joined."

Koestler fully keeps the promise that I have put into his mouth. He illumines the situation from every point of view: Jewish, Arab, British, Zionist, anti-Zionist, radical, conservative. He gives us the feel of a people and a land, even if he does not create character; he gives us the illusion of being "there." This is good reporting. He brings home to us the tragedy of Palestine, as Hersey brought home to many readers the tragedy of Hiroshima, by expressing the general in terms of the particular, in terms of a few individuals with individual features and names and biographies. Joseph the English-Jewish protagonist, Dina the victim of Nazi brutality, and all the others who incarnate various factors of the "problem" may be little better than instruments, but they serve the purposes of an author who is not primarily concerned with fiction. Koestler's own point of view is expressed through shifting arguments that may, in part at least, prove offensive to many of his fellow Jews; but, as between conservatives and radicals, he stands firmly with Dr. Herzl who said: "If you are faced with a fence and can't creep through under it, your only choice is to jump. For twenty centuries we have tried to creep through

under the fence. They wouldn't let us. Now we are taking the jump." It should be noted, with respect, that Koestler wrote this novel in English; and it should be remarked, at least in passing, that he seems to have acquired during his English residence an excellent likeness of the native sense of humor.

Another notable example of a novelist's failure or refusal to transmute his material may be found in *The Seventh of October*,² the fourteenth and final volume of the English translation of Jules Romains' *Men of Good Will*, that long and ambitious serial study of French civilization from 1908 to 1933. In this concluding installment of his prodigious fiction, woven upon a sturdy warp of fact, M. Romains suspends his narrative and the actions of his created characters to deliver a lecture in his own auctorial person. Entitled "A Picture of Europe in October 1933," and running to fifty-one solid pages, this lecture is a bold historical outline, intended to explain the state in which Europe found itself when it was called upon to meet Hitler's challenge. Written with hindsight, by an informed and thoughtful man, it is a discourse in the grand manner, well worth reading; but it remains unassimilated by the novel which encompasses it. With no great difficulty it could have been incorporated in a conversation between our old friends Jerphanion and Jallez, with Bartlett and Caulet putting in their bits. M.

Romains, however, chose otherwise.

Now that the longest novel of our day is finally finished, it will be possible to view and judge it as a whole; but this will require careful re-reading. My present impression is that the promise of the early volumes has not been completely fulfilled, that the author's abundant powers have been somewhat dissipated *en route*, that his retrospective view may have colored the thoughts and words of his characters, that the whole has dwindled as it has approached its conclusion. This can all be true, and at the same time *Men of Good Will* can be, compared with its contemporary rivals, a work of power, insight, material richness, and importance. If its final stature is less than it might have been, the catastrophe of the Second World War may well be to blame, for we must remember that when M. Romains began to write his *opus magnum* he still believed that there was a possibility of men of good will banding together to assure an age of peace.

III

Most numerous of recent occasional novels are those which have found their occasion in war. Some of these have proved to be good fiction when judged by high standards, others have been acceptable for the sake of their matter, and many have demonstrated the old truth that great events may inspire trivial writing. One of the best war books I have seen is one of the shortest: *Casualty*,³ by Robert Lowry.

Here the specific occasion is subordinate to the animating theme. The scene is Foggia, Italy. The date is January 1945. The characters are American soldiers: men, noncommissioned officers, and officers of a photo reconnaissance wing. The action is fast, concentrated, quickly over. But the effects of its impact on the reader are not quickly over. Mr. Lowry is another author who gives life to a large and general subject by reducing it to, and expressing it in, comprehensible, particular symbols. Unlike Mr. Koestler, however, he does a novelist's work. Writing of the conflict between man and militarism, between human dignity and a force which acknowledges no such dignity, he writes with a bitterness that is based on the bedrock of truth.

He makes his points with the clarity and irrefutability of a geometer demonstrating a proposition, but he makes them with an emotion that is unknown to the abstract sciences; he makes them by writing a fine story. His is a rapidly developing talent.

John P. Marquand's talent, on the other hand, is a fully developed one which operates smoothly and easily on a pleasant plateau not too high for popular respiration. His latest story, *B. F.'s Daughter*,⁴ is further than Mr. Lowry's from the pure occasional type, but it exploits to the top of its author's bent a state of affairs and a psychology through which we have all just lived.

At his best, Mr. Marquand is a pol-

³ \$2. *New Directions*.

⁴ \$2.75. *Little, Brown*.

ished satirist; and at all times a master of ridicule. In *B. F.'s Daughter*, the story of a poor little new-rich girl who is determined to escape from the domination of her adoring but overwhelming father, he has many targets; in general, the more absurd aspects of the American war effort and war psychology, and, in particular, idealistic do-gooders, desk-fighters, corny war correspondents, military planners, Air Force public relations officers, girls' boarding schools, rich American marriages and divorces, Army and Navy E's for excellence, sentimental big businessmen, and the Washington maelstrom. Some of these targets are easy, some more difficult: on all of them Mr. Marquand scores amusingly. Since he probably harbored no very profound intentions while writing this book, I do not see why we should not sit back and enjoy an expert performance, while agreeing with Sidney Smith's declaration: "My test of a book written to amuse, is amusement." The story of Polly Fulton, who could run away from her father but not from herself, is a new and highly entertaining variation of Mr. Marquand's favorite pattern.

Charles Jackson's *The Fall of Valor*⁵ was, we may be sure, written with great seriousness, but this does not save it from being wholly disappointing. This is no occasional novel, for it might have been set in Victorian London, or in Prince Philippe zu Eulenberg's Berlin, as well as in the New York and Nantucket of the

summer of 1943. Few persons, I imagine, need to be told by now that it is the story of a professor, twenty years married and father of two boys, who discovers in his middle forties that he is a homosexual, a fact that he has never suspected before. In his effort to make his protagonist an innocent victim of fate, the author has gone so far as to make him quite incredible. No more believable is his wife, a peculiarly unpleasant fictive concoction, who "knows all" in a flash when she finds a Marine's cap in her husband's suitcase. (That he might have accepted it from their friend Cliff Hauman, as a souvenir for their children, never occurs to her.) Equally unreal, and equipped with equally questionable percipience, are Mr. and Mrs. Howard.

Mr. Jackson is not happy in his effort to write about supposedly mature people; indeed, it may be remembered that he was not happy when he moved outside the adolescent mind of Don Birnam, in *The Lost Weekend*, while he was impressively successful so long as he stayed inside it. As for style, that which served for the drunkard's progress does not serve here; the writing shows marks of conscious care, but the product is mediocre.

IV

With François Mauriac's *The Woman of the Pharisees*,⁶ we leave even a superficial timeliness behind. This is a pure novel, laid in provincial France during

⁵ \$2.75. Rinehart.

⁶ \$2.50. Holt.

the early years of our century, written in the classical, economical French tradition that is so sharply opposed to the tradition made and followed by such story-tellers as Richardson, Fielding, Dickens and Bennett. Actions, talk and explanations are pared: every sentence counts. With the creation of Brigitte Pian, this distinguished Catholic novelist adds another remarkable portrait to his gallery, which owes its originals to the men and women of Bordeaux and the Landes.

Brigitte is a false saint, whose goodness is deadly to those it touches, whose tragedy is the discovery of herself. One need be neither Catholic nor even Christian to be delighted by M. Mauriac's subtleties, to be moved by his art, an art which surmounts any barriers of belief that may lie between author and reader. It is time that François Mauriac enjoyed in the United States a reputation equal to that enjoyed by a few of his peers and some of his inferiors.

In *The Saint and the Hunchback*,⁷ Donald A. Stauffer travels back to the seventh century to give us a study of a saint in the making, and to give his imagination a happy holiday. Odo, the young monk of Iona, is a complete man who finds the pursuit and practice of holiness a difficult occupation; but the Church has often dealt triumphantly with apparently intractable material, and Odo is at least stubbornly determined to realize his appointed destiny. Holiness apart, he is a very attractive fellow, as is his

beloved princess, not to mention the less obvious charms of little Aelfric. Attractive, too, is Mr. Stauffer's narrative, for in it he has mixed playful and serious ingredients with a nice discretion.

And so at last we come to *Titus Groan*,⁸ by Mervyn Peake, and to a kind of writing that is as distant as possible from the occasional novel with which we began; even more distant than Mr. Stauffer's romantic-philosophical-adventurous brew. The weird and wonderful tale of the realm of Gormenghast, ruled over by the seventy-sixth earl, father of Titus, is described by its publishers as "gothic." It is all that and considerably more, as Beckford and Horace Walpole would be the first to admit.

At first sight one might think that in it imagination had gone mad, but it is nearer the truth to say that Mr. Peake's imagination — the remarkable property of a man who is a portrait painter, poet, illustrator and humorist rolled into one — has been used with cunning and calculation to produce fractional passages of extraordinary vividness, vitality, color, satirical interest, and even beauty, which add up to no understandable whole. In *Titus Groan*, as in Dali's most baffling canvases, the details are models of lucidity. One need go no further than the riotous scene in Swelter's kitchen to know that one is reading a man whose power over words is great, whose technique is brilliant, particularly in the projection

⁷ \$1.75. Simon & Schuster.

⁸ \$3. Reynal & Hitchcock.

of visual images. But what of the whole? Its meaning? My own conclusion is that we were never meant to ask.

Our cross section is complete. Limited though it is to a few books of a brief period, it still shows the novel

serving many masters, not always well, but with a vitality and a range of possibility that assure the continuing importance of the form. It is a great house, of many mansions, that can give living-room to a Koestler, a Mauriac, a Lowry, and a Peake.

OLD WIFE

BY ETHEL BARNETT DEVITO

She had not had the usual kind
 Of troubles folks were sure would find
 One foolish enough to have her head
 And take a younger man to wed,
 But something they had failed to mark
 Loomed up before her, vast and dark —

Days, with the mounting chores to heap
 And lay between them acres-deep
 She'd weigh it short or cast it by,
 Engulfed by their oneness and the tie
 Of somehow best in time and weather,
 Of working singly and yet together.

But nights with him by her side so close
 That she might touch him if she chose,
 She'd listen, plagued, as the hours crept,
 To words he mumbled as he slept;
 And she would wonder painfully
 Whom he might see, where he might be,
 What worlds between them must be spanned
 To reach him, though she held his hand —
 You could fight a trouble felt or seen
 But how could you fight against a dream?
 And she would think, as darkness pressed,
 How soft and easy she might rest
 If all the troubles life supplied
 Were of the kind folks prophesied. . . .