

In Defence of the Novel, George Orwell

It hardly needs pointing out that at this moment the prestige of the novel is extremely low, so low that the words 'I never read novels', which even a dozen years ago were generally uttered with a hint of apology, are now always uttered in a tone of conscious pride. It is true that there are still a few contemporary or roughly contemporary novelists whom the intelligentsia considers it permissible to read; but the point is that the ordinary good-bad novel is habitually ignored while the ordinary good-bad books of verse or criticism is still taken seriously.

This means that if you write novels you automatically command a less intelligent public than you would command if you had chosen some other form. There are two quite obvious reasons why this must presently make it impossible for good novels to be written. Even now the novel is visibly deteriorating, and it would deteriorate much faster if most novelists had any idea who reads their books. It is, of course, easy to argue (vide for instance Belloc's queerly rancorous essay) that the novel is a contemptible form of art and that its fate does not matter. I doubt whether that opinion is even worth disputing. At any rate, I am taking it for granted that the novel is worth salvaging and that in order to salvage it you have got to persuade intelligent people to take it seriously. It is therefore worth while to analyze one of the many causes - in my opinion, the main cause - of the novel's lapse in prestige.

The trouble is that the novel is being shouted out of existence. Question any thinking person as to why he 'never reads novels', and you will usually find that, at bottom, it is because of the disgusting tripe that is written by the blurb-reviewers. There is no need to multiply examples. Here is just one specimen, from last week's Sunday Times: 'If you can read this book and not shriek with delight, your soul is dead.' That or something like it is now being written about every novel published, as you can see by studying the quotes on the blurbs. For anyone who takes the Sunday Times seriously, life must be one long struggle to catch up.

Novels are being shot at you at the rate of fifteen a day, and every one of them an unforgettable masterpiece which you imperil your soul by missing. It must make it so difficult to choose a book at the library, and you must feel so guilty when you fail to shriek with delight. Actually, however, no one who matters is deceived by this kind of thing, and the contempt into which novel reviewing has fallen is extended to novels themselves. When all novels are thrust upon you as words of genius, it is quite natural to assume that all of them are tripe. Within the literary intelligentsia this assumption is now taken for granted. To admit that you like novels is nowadays almost equivalent to admitting that you have a hankering after coconut ice or prefer Rupert Brooke to Gerard Manley Hopkins.

All this is obvious. What I think is rather less obvious is the way in which the present situation has arisen. On the face of it, the book-ramp is a quite simple and cynical swindle. Z writes a book which is published by Y and reviewed by X in the Weekly W. If the review is a bad one Y will remove his advertisement, so X has to hand out 'unforgettable masterpiece' or get the sack. Essentially that is the position, and novel reviewing has sunk to its present depth largely because every reviewer has some publisher or publishers twisting his tail by proxy. But the thing is not so crude as it looks. The various parties to the swindle are not consciously acting together, and they have been forced into their present position partly against their will.

To begin with, one ought not to assume, as is so often done (see for instance Beachcomber's column, *passim*), that the novelist enjoys and is even in some way responsible for the reviews he gets. Nobody likes being told that he has written a palpitating take of passion which will last as long as the English language; though, of course, it is disappointing not to be told that, because all novelists are being told the same, and to be left out presumably means that your books won't sell. The hack review is in fact a sort of commercial necessity, like the blurb on the dust-jacket, of which it is merely an extension. But even the wretched hack reviewer is not to be blamed for the drivel he writes. In his special circumstances he could write nothing else. For even if there were no question of bribery, direct or indirect, there can be no such thing as good novel criticism so long as it is assumed that every novel is worth reviewing.

A periodical gets its weekly wad of books and sends off a dozen of them to X, the hack reviewer, who has a wife and family and has got to earn this guinea, not to mention the half-crown per vol. which he gets by selling his review copies. There are two reasons why it is totally impossible for X to tell the truth about the books he gets. To begin with, the chances are that eleven out of the twelve books will fail to rouse in him the faintest spark of interest. They are not more than ordinarily bad, they are merely neutral, lifeless and pointless. If he were not paid to do so he would never read a line of any of them, and in nearly every case the only truthful review he could write would be: 'this book inspires in me no thoughts whatever.' But will anyone pay you to write that kind of thing? Obviously not. As a start, therefore, X is in the false position of having to manufacture, say, three hundred words about a book which means nothing to him whatever. Usually he does it by giving a brief résumé of the plot (incidentally betraying to the author the fact that he hasn't read the book) and handing out a few compliments which for all their fulsomeness are about as valuable as the smile of a prostitute.

But there is a far worse evil than this. X is expected not only to say what a book is about but to give his opinion as to whether it is good or bad. Since X can hold a pen he is probably not a fool, at any rate not such a fool as to imagine that *The Constant Nymph* is the most terrific tragedy ever written. Very likely his own favourite novelist, if he cares for novels at all, is *Stendhal*, or *Dickens* or *Jane Austen*, or *D. H. Lawrence*, or *Dostoyevsky* — or at any rare, someone immeasurably better than the ordinary run of contemporary novelist. He has got to start, therefore, by immensely lowering his standards. As I have pointed out elsewhere, to apply a decent standard to the ordinary run of novels is like weighing a flea on a spring-balance intended for elephants.

On such a balance as that a fleas would simply fail to register; you would have to start by constructing another balance which revealed the fact that there are big fleas and little fleas. And this approximately is what X does. It is no use monotonously saying, of book after book, 'This book is tripe,' because, once again, no one will pay you for writing that kind of thing. X has got to discover something which is not tripe, and pretty frequently, or get the sack. This means sinking his standards to a depth at which, say, *Ethel M. Dell's Way of an Eagle* is a fairly good book. But on a scale of values which makes *The Way of an Eagle* a good book, *The Constant Nymph* is a superb book, and *The Man of Property* is — what? A palpitating tale of passion, a terrific, soul-shattering masterpiece, an unforgettable epic which will last as long as the English language and so forth. (As for any really good book, it would burst the

thermometer.) Having started with the assumption that all novels are good, the reviewer is driven ever upwards on a topless ladder of adjectives.

And sic itur ad Gould(1). You can see reviewer after reviewer going the same road. Within two years of starting out with at any rate moderately honest intentions, he is proclaiming with maniacal screams that Miss Barbara Bedworthy's *Crimson Night* is the most terrific, trenchant, poignant, unforgettable, of the earth earthy and so forth master piece which has ever, etc. etc. etc. There is no way out of it when you have once committed the initial sin of pretending that a bad book is a good one. But you cannot review novels for a living without committing that sin. And meanwhile every intelligent reader turns away, disgusted, and to despise novels becomes a kind of snobbish duty. Hence the queer fact that it is possible for a novel of real merit to escape notice, merely because it has been praised in the same terms as tripe.

Various people have suggested that it would be all to the good if no novels were reviewed at all. So it would, but the suggestion is useless, because nothing of the kind is going to happen. No paper which depends on publishers' advertisements can afford to throw them away, and though the more intelligent publishers probably realize that they would be not worse off if the blurb-review were abolished, they cannot put an end to it for the same reason as the nations cannot disarm — because nobody wants to be the first to start. For a long time yet the blurb-reviews are going to continue and they are going to grow worse and worse; the only remedy is to contrive in some way that they shall be disregarded. But this can only happen if somewhere or other there is decent novel reviewing which will act as a standard of comparison. That is to say, there is need of just one periodical (one would be enough for a start) which makes a speciality of novel reviewing but refused to take any notice of tripe, and in which the reviewers are reviewers and not ventriloquists' dummies clapping their jaws when the publisher pulls the string.

It may be answered that there are such periodicals already. There are quite a number of highbrow magazines, for instance, in which the novel reviewing, what there is of it, is intelligent and not suborned. Yes, but the point is that periodicals of that kind do not make a speciality of novel reviewing, and certainly make no attempt to keep abreast of the current output of fiction. They belong to the highbrow world, the world in which it is already assumed that novels, as such, are despicable. But the novel is a popular form of art, and it is no use to approach it with the Criterion-Scrutiny assumption that literature is a game of back-scratching (claws in or claws out according to circumstances) between tiny cliques of highbrows. The novelist is primarily a storyteller, and a man may be a very good storyteller (vide for instance Trollope, Charles Reade, Mr Somerset Maugham) without being in the narrow sense an 'intellectual'. Five thousand novels are published every year, and Ralph Straus(2) implores you to read all of them, or would it he had all of them to review. The Criterion probably deigns to notice a dozen. But between the dozen and the five thousand there may be a hundred or two hundred or even five hundred which at different levels have genuine merit, and it is on these that any critic who cares for the novel ought to concentrate.

But the first necessity is some method of grading. Great numbers of novels never ought to be mentioned at all (imagine for instance the awful effects on criticism if every serial in *Peg's Paper* had to be solemnly reviewed!), but even the ones that are worth mentioning belong to quite different categories. *Raffles* is a good book, and so is *The Island of Dr*

Moreau, and so is La Chartreuse de Parme, and so is Macbeth; but they are 'good' at very different levels. Similarly, If Winter Comes and The Well-Beloved and An Unsocial Socialist and Sir Lancelot Greaves are all bad books, but at different levels of 'badness'. This is the fact that the hack reviewer has made it his special business to obscure. It ought to be possible to devise a system, perhaps quite a rigid one, of grading novels into classes A, B, C and so forth, so that whether a reviewer praised or damned a book, you would at least know how seriously he meant it to be taken. As for the reviewers, they would have to be people who really cared for the art of the novel (and that means, probably, neither highbrows nor lowbrows nor midbrows, but elastic-brows), people interested in technique and still more interested in discovering what a book is about.

There are plenty of such people in existence; some of the very worst of the hack reviewers, though now past praying for, started like that, as you can see by glancing at their earlier work. Incidentally, it would be a good thing if more novel reviewing were done by amateurs. A man who is not a practised writer but has just read a book which has deeply impressed him is more likely to tell you what it is about than a competent but bored professional. That is why American reviews, for all their stupidity, are better than English ones; they are more amateurish, that is to say, more serious.

I believe that in some such way as I have indicated the prestige of the novel could be restored. The essential need is a paper that would keep abreast of current fiction and yet refuse to sink its standards. It would have to be an obscure paper, for the publishers would not advertise in it; on the other hand, once they had discovered that somewhere there was praise that was real praise; they would be ready enough to quote it on their blurbs. Even if it were a very obscure paper it would probably cause the general level of novel reviewing to rise, for the drivel in the Sunday papers only continues because there is nothing with which to contrast it. But even if the blurb reviewers continued exactly as before, it would not matter so long as there also existed decent reviewing to remind a few people that serious brains can still occupy themselves with the novel. For just as the Lord promised that he would not destroy Sodom if ten righteous men could be found there, so the novel will not be utterly despised while it is known that somewhere or other there is even a handful of novel reviewers with no straws in their hair.

At present, if you care about novels and still more if you write them, the outlook is depressing in the extreme. The word 'novel' calls up the words 'blurb', 'genius' and Ralph Straus' as automatically as 'chicken' calls up 'bread sauce'. Intelligent people avoid novels almost instinctively; as a result, established novelists go to pieces and beginners who 'have something to say' turn in preference to almost any other form. The degradation that must follow is obvious. Look for instance at the fourpenny novelettes that you see piled up on any cheap stationer's counter. These things are the decadent offspring of the novel, bearing the same relation to Manon Lescaut and David Copperfield as the lap-dog bears to the wolf.

It is quite likely that before long the average novel will be not much different from the fourpenny novelette, though doubtless it will still appear in a seven and sixpenny binding and amid a flourish of publishers' trumpets. Various people have prophesied that the novel is doomed to disappear in the near future. I do not believe that it will disappear, for reasons which would take too long to set forth but which are fairly obvious. It is much likelier, if the best literary brains cannot be

induced to return to it, to survive in some perfunctory, despised and hopelessly degenerate form, like modern tomb-stones, or the Punch and Judy show.

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(1) Gerald Gould, at the time an influential novel reviewer for the Observer.

(2) Ralph Straus (1882-1950), chief fiction reviewer for the Sunday Times from 1928 until his death.

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