

Art in Literature

Part One

Harried beyond all endurance by the editor of the *Red and White*, I promised him to formulate a theory of art in literature. The theory I was going to advance was substantially the one offered by Arthur Machen in that admirable little book of his called "Hieroglyphics." Accordingly I put down in fine order on several pages weighty conclusions as to several tests for art in literature. Reading them over again the next day, the thought struck me, "Good Heavens! this is as boring as some of those essays that my students wrote for me the other day." Shocked thus abruptly out of my complacency, I cast around frantically for some new form of presentation. The dialogue occurred to me. St. Anselm, for example, wrote many of his treatises in the form of a dialogue between a teacher and a pupil. This is a very good way to go about it, because pupils always agree very politely with their teachers. So I have chosen this method. But if you hear a sound as of bones rattling, it will probably be Plato or Bishop Berkely turning over in his grave.

The learned old professor was sunning himself on the Club-house verandah. A beaker of sparkling Coca Cola stood on a table at his elbow. A faint breeze stirred through the trees like the sigh of a golfer who has just missed a two-foot putt; from the neighboring fairways, soft oaths, mellowed by the distance, floated through the still air; the gentle hum of alibis crept softly through the locker-room windows; in short, Nature was at her best, and a great peace flooded the professor's soul as he lay back stroking his long gray beard.

Up the verandah steps plodded a weary young soul. He was the living embodiment of our tired old civilization. All the cares and disappointments of the long centuries looked through his eyes. Life was a hollow shell, a sad jest; a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Obviously he had failed again to break a hundred. He nodded sadly as he recognized his professor, and dropped wearily into a chair beside him. "Golf!" he cried bitterly. "It is the crowning imbecility of a futile and effete civilization. It has poisoned the world. Mankind is beyond redemption. I deny my own

kind. Henceforth I devote my life to the service of dumb animals—they cannot speak for themselves, and they don't play golf. They are the only clean things left in creation. I'll become a reformer. I'll make speeches and distribute literature!"

Aghast at the prospect of one more reformer in the world, the old professor gave a start. Searching hurriedly for some device to distract the young man's mind from the idea before it became fixed, he seized upon the word "literature" like a hound on his prey.

"Ah, 'literature,'" he said. "It seems, if you will allow me to venture a criticism, that you use the word rather vaguely. As a professor I must protest such carelessness in words. You start a society for the protection of dumb oysters, and you write 'literature.' Premier Bennett bars from the country magazines like *Snappy Stories* and *Ballyhoo* on the ground that they are 'undesirable literature.' Edgar Wallace's detective stories are advertised as 'light literature.' And of course we call such things as the *Odyssey* and *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote* 'classical literature.' Now it seems to me that if we are going to use the word at all it should have a very definite meaning. After all it doesn't seem quite proper to put a thing like *Hamlet* in the same category as a tract of the Watch Tower Bible Society. Don't you think we should strive for a little finer precision in our language?"

With a sigh of resignation to the inevitable, the student settled back. "What do you think literature is?" he inquired.

"I am inclined to agree with Thomas Carlyle that literature is the thought of thinking souls," returned the professor somewhat unctuously.

"Have you ever read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*?" asked the student in anything but an amiable tone.

"Well, no, I haven't quite got around to it yet," replied the professor somewhat abashedly.

"My congratulations," proffered the student to the professor. "It is pre-eminently the thought of a thinking soul, but I would maintain against Hitler himself that it is not literature. A single exception renders a definition invalid, so you'll have to give me a better one than that."

"Stopford Brooks says that writing is literature when it gives the reader pleasure, both from the things said and from the way in which they are said; and that pleasure is

only given when the words are carefully and beautifully put together in sentences."

"If you had ever come out of your pedantic seclusion long enough to read the *Saturday Evening Post* you would know that the stories in there not only give pleasure, but also are often expressed in careful and beautiful language. However, since you insist on preciseness of language, I must refuse to call them literature. But come now, professor, enough of these silly eclecticism. Give me your own ideas on the subject."

Somewhat disconcerted, the professor replied hurriedly, "It seems to me that a mark of literature would be that it does good. Yes, a book that does good in this wicked old world of ours is fine literature."

"Don't be absurd," returned the student. "If that were the case you would have to include such things as the booklets in the pamphlet-racks at the back of our churches; or the kind of play we so often see performed by amateur players—the main essential of which seems to be that there be an average of three sudden (and usually quite inexplicable) conversions to every act. I won't deny that instances of good literature might be advanced out of both these classes; but to put a treatise on mixed marriages written in story form in the same class as the *Morte D'Arthur*, that I utterly refuse to do. No, professor, you'll have to do better than that."

Placed thus on his mettle, the gray-bearded pedant reflected thoughtfully for a moment. "I read a book the other day that stirred me intensely. In fact it was so good that it actually brought tears to my eyes. I would call that a great book."

"The faculty of arousing one's emotions, then, you would designate as the mark of literature?"

"Yes," said the professor complacently, satisfied now that he finally had a good definition.

"Well, I received a letter the other day asking for the loan of ten dollars. That little piece of writing stirred my emotions. In fact it brought tears to my eyes. I fail to see any essential difference between this letter and your 'great book.' Perhaps another example will make it clearer. A woman is awaiting the return of her husband and son. She receives a telegram—'Railway accident—father killed.' The shock to her emotions will be an intense one. But the telegram is not literature. The

emotion-exciting book is usually nothing more than a stringing together of many such things as the telegram or the letter. The fact that the book may be three or four hundred pages in length does not raise it out of that class. The faculty of arousing emotion, while it may be present in true literature, is not the essential mark of true literature."

"We are getting nowhere," broke in the professor somewhat petulantly. "After all, it seems to me that if a book interests me enough to keep me at it, then it is good literature. What gives me pleasure in reading is true literature for me; what gives you pleasure is literature for you, although it may be something entirely opposite in character. As far as that goes, what may be literature in my opinion now may not be so for me five years from now, for my taste may alter in that length of time. In short, it's a waste of time to attempt to find an unvarying, an absolute standard in literature. Everything is relative anyhow—the cream of today is the cheese of tomorrow," he concluded triumphantly.

"Indeed, sir," politely answered the young student, "you are in good company, at any rate;—that is, if you like the company of men like H. L. Mencken and his attendant cohort of illogicians. Really, you know, nothing can be relative except in relation to some absolute, and to talk of relativity while at the same time denying the possibility of an absolute is a sheer contradiction in terms—the very worst of bad logic."

At this point, with a muttered apology, the professor attempted to take his leave, but our young student peremptorily waved him back into his chair.

"We have not yet considered the first half of your remark," he continued placidly. "Now I don't think the power of exciting interest can ever be a proper form of art in literature—or in any other field of art, as far as that goes. I have seen men so interested in the Sunday Supplement of the *Boston Post* that they couldn't put it down; I have seen presumably intelligent people chewing their nails over the *Love Story Magazine*; and I have seen people put down *Pickwick Papers* in disgust. There should be no difficulty in discarding the word 'interest' as a criterion of artistic excellence. Undoubtedly it can be applied to all works of art, but it can be applied equally well to the blobs of a child artist of four or to an ac-

count of your best friend's latest tiff with his best girl. And under this last heading I think we may group immediately all those silly novels that seem to appeal so strongly to the modern mind—novels like *The Sheik*, *Love Wins Through*, *Passions Playthings*, and so on."

By this time the professor was mumbling darkly into his beard, but the student was relentless.

"There are three more criteria which are commonly advanced and which you have failed so far to adduce. If a book shows fidelity to life, if its characters and incidents are real; if its elements are well put together, if its design or construction is adequate; and if its style is good, if its words are well chosen, then you have a fine book—a book that is literature. In brief, literature mirrors life faithfully, and the skill of the artist consists in choosing and arranging properly those incidents that are best suited to his purpose. Now as to the first of these,—fidelity to life—keenness of observation—clearness of reflection—this attitude towards art is responsible for much of the contemporary confusion in literary values. Fielding, with his *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*, is the earliest English representative of this school that I can think of. Pope, Jane Austin, and Thackeray, have carried on the torch. The method is most prominent today. Perhaps its most famous exponent is James Joyce in his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. The writers of this group are known today as the 'stream of consciousness' school. They maintain that the function of art is to reproduce with exact fidelity, even to the point of including the most trivial details, whatever part of their character's life they happen to be treating of. In *Ulysses*, for example, Joyce takes over seven hundred pages to describe a single day in the lives of two men. He endeavours to reproduce every single thought, clear or shadowy, entire or half-complete, from the earliest conscious moment of his character until the end of his day.

"But if this is to be our test, then we are forced at once to discard such things as the *Odyssey*, *Don Quixote*, the *Morte D'Arthur*, *The Lady of Shalott*, *Lycidas*, *Paradise Lost*, and a whole host of like things which are certainly not faithful representations of life in the meaning of the gentlemen we were discussing above. This would truly be absurd, do you not agree?"

"What you say is true," returned the professor meekly.

"Very well, then. I admit that we have treated the question in a rather crude fashion, but we will leave it at that for the present. Let us get on to our next test—that of design, or the skill with which the work is constructed. I think you will readily agree with me that there is no essential difference between the skill with which an artist puts a book together and that which a shoemaker uses in making a shoe—or the skill with which a bee constructs the wax cell for his honey—or the art which a renowned chef exercises in cooking some famous dish. Artifice rather than art is the proper word for all of these cases, and it simply means the conscious adaption of means to an end. It is the mental instrument which the artist uses for the attainment of his end—the faculty whereby he chooses and rejects the materials that go into the make-up of his book. It is not necessarily the mark of art—every good newspaper reporter has this faculty.

"And lastly, as to style,—a much harder problem to deal with than the others. If all you mean by a good style is that style which clearly and plainly expresses the author's meaning, then a good style is the accomplishment of any first-rate stenographer. If the purpose of style is simply utilitarian, then a cook-book is a work of art. I think you will agree that style in this sense is not necessarily a sign of art."

"To be sure," concurred our learned professor.

"Very well, then. Leaving aside for the time being a further examination of this problem of style, I think we have managed to deal with most of the popular tests of literature;—or do you think we have missed any of them?" anxiously inquired the student.

"Not at all," returned the professor hastily.

"Then, as it is getting rather late, I suggest that you come in and have dinner with me, and we can go on with our discussion afterwards."

Meekly bowing acquiescence, the professor rose from his chair. He sighed faintly and followed his host into the Club-house.—D.J.S.

(To be concluded in the May edition of *Red & White*.)

Oft expectation fails, and most oft there
Where most it promises. —*Shakespeare*