Sex-and-violence and the origin of the novel

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A few years ago the respective critics of the New Statesman and the Spectator described an adventure story by Mr. Ian Fleming as "without doubt the nastiest book I have every read"[1] and as "providing sheer entertainment such as I, who must read many novels, am seldom lucky enough to find"[2]. Comment has been made on the popularity of this writer with Cabinet Ministers. George Orwell once wrote of the very different novels of Mr. Mickey Spillane and Mr. James Hadley Chase (who were supposed by Englishmen to have a similar social range of popularity in America) that "Freud and Machiavelli have reached the outer suburbs."

Mr. Spillane and Mr. Chase specialise in affectless violence. Mr. Fleming is more gentlemanly (it was his upper-class hero who provoked the New Statesman) and specialises in masochistic fantasy in erotic settings — he has given Bulldog Drummond a sex life. All three have attracted hostile notice directed at a genre; I would describe the genre itself as the erotic comic-book for literate adults. The pictorial comic-book reflects so well the psychodynamic state of its parent society (which it is often accused of producing) that it is not surprising to find non-pictorial comic-books written for the literate, or read — if the remarks about Cabinet Ministers are correct — by those who are themselves engaged in writing the comic-book of contemporary history. (I recently read that "Monk" Lewis was a member of parliament). Such books belong to erotic literature, but the erotic literature of a culture which operates a selective censorship against normal eroticism. They therefore deal, as a rule, not with love but with hate, the cult of sexual and general violence, and the ghoulish. This cult is distasteful, though the violence of the attack on it in some quarters has itself the appearance of excitement at the matter at-tacked: it is also traditional: — Mario Praz's catalogue[3] of the morbid preoccupations of the Romantics — sadism, diabolism, the character of woman as Medusa and bitch, the exaltation of suffering and corruption — is a statement of the emotional handicaps which have affected Western art intermittently since the Second century, not the Nineteenth. When there is a critical row about them, it is still directed at those authors who dilute them with references to normal sexuality. They are now the predominant matter of commercial entertainment: in the comic-book they are reduced to pictorial psychosymbols without the literary cover they have previously had; in the literary-comic the psychosymbols go back into literary form, still indecently exposed. The essence of this form is

[1] New Statesman, 5 April, 1958.

[2] Spectator, 4 April, 1958.

[3] Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (O.U.P. 1951).

that its effect depends on motif not manner, and that the plot is a pretext for the incident: this is equally true of more pretentious literature, but in the case of the literary-comic the fact is frankly recognised by all; the novelist's first need is a good knowledge or intuition for the natural history of human sexual response to situational symbols. Now and then he can be too good — part of the adverse comment on the three writers I have mentioned, especially Mr. Fleming, is due to their ability to free-associate (or read up and put in) really threatening psychoanalytical matter in a bare form. Part is due to uneasiness among liberal readers to see such matter made unpleasantly real at a time when history and psychotic fantasy are dangerously convergent. For them, the comic-book threatens both social morals and polite fiction — which already contains the same material, but better-wrapped.

Gothic Schauerromantik is by now a popular dissertation subject. The interesting thing about the literary "comic-book" is that it owes little to Gothicism — less than the modern serious or "unpopular" novel. The writers of the literary-comic are going further back, if not for their inspiration, at least for their precedent, for the novel did not generate the literary-comic: phylogenetically, the literary-comic generated the novel, in the society of second- and third-century Alexandria, which also generated our literary morals. Alexandrine novels include the most likeable of all erotic stories, Daphnis and Chloe, but the manner of Longus assorted ill with the growth of Christendom: the modern literary-comic mimics in incident, though not in spirit or style, other romances of the same period which are far more familiar in key. I am not so sure of Mr. Spillane, but Mr. Fleming has his ancestry there — possibly in Achilles Tatius, whose Cleitophon and Leucippe is the best and most characteristic of literary-comics, with something of the modern pace, and almost all of the familiar psychosomatic obsessions. This particular romance generated not only Candide but, by way of Sidney's Arcadia, a sizeable number of modern European novels. The effect of the original is neither Hollywood nor, as it could easily be, Evelyn Waugh; the whole performance is by modern standards quite un-nasty even when it is sophisticated, and never satirical, though now and then it is quietly ironic. Some episodes recall the disturbing but fabulous matter of the nursery tales, in which decapitated and revived princesses have their ancestry — others have echoes of The Magic Flute and the sham ordeals of the Masonic initiation: the sufferings of the lovers are a game, evoking no more protest than a children's game of captives and executions where the heroine will be called in from the stake to tea.

Yet compared with other romances, compared with Apuleius or Heliodorus, or even Xenophon of Ephesus — whose hero is crucified, falls into the Nile cross and all, and sails down the river on it, while his heroine is put in a pit full of wild dogs — Tatius is tangibly nearer the comic-book tradition. The comic-book is a story which is a pretext for sexually-coloured psychosymbolic incidents where the theme, not the treatment, is the selling point. Tatius is also closer to the comic than Longus or Apuleius in what he leaves out. This is supposed to be a love-story, but unlike Daphnis and Chloe, or The Golden Ass and the Satiricon, which are not love stories at all in principle, it is strikingly assexual. Tatius foreshadows the literature of conventional chivalry. but he also foreshadows the modern and pre-modern literature of impotence. This has been called a "panegyric of chastity,"[4] and one is aware off-stage of a virulent contemporary monasticism which regarded women as evil and suffering as an acceptable substitute; in which martyrdom as a prelude to resurrection was the only decent form of sexual excitement, and in which Origen castrated himself physically as well as emotionally. Tatius

[4] F. A Todd, Some Ancient Novels (O.U.P. 1940).

rather than Longus sets the key of the literary-erotic tradition of Christendom: it is with suffering, not women, that his readers are already expected to be in love. In his choice of Andromeda and Prometheus to preside over the story, Tatius has accurately selected the tutelary deities of European Romanticism, and of the emotional disabilities which have perpetually haunted it. For Andromeda is not only the captive princess of chivalry who is there to be rescued — she is de Sade's Misfortunes of Virtue; she symbolises the ambivalence of literature towards tormented maidens. Tatius makes Prometheus Andromeda's male twin. They are unjustly condemned, male and female. In their constructive moments they have been pity and liberty, chivalry and revolution; but they have a number of darker avatars as the gratuitously ill-used heroine, and the victim of the tormentor-father — the revolutionary and erotic images which alternate so disconcertingly in The Revolt of Islam.

In Shelley, the gallery of unfortunate virtue is complete — Prometheus punished by Zeus, Beatrice Cenci exposed as victim, not of a decently reticent monster, but to the incestuous assaults of a father who talks very like de Sade; and finally the lovers of The Revolt of Islam, translated from the stake to a Baroque landscape in a fantasy of really alarming intensity, where sexual excitement, masochism, lyrical poetry and revolutionary politics are inextricable and interchangeable. This mixture was evidently not to everybody's taste: Shelley defended the work against the protests of his friends with the same well-justified candour as Flaubert — "The poem was produced by a series of thoughts which filled my mind with sustained and unbounded enthusiasm. I felt that it was in many respects a picture of my own mind." The same psychosymbolic material is exploited "in The Cenci, and finally tamed in Prometheus, but it is in the extended form of The Revolt of Islam that the self-identification is most whole-hearted. There is certainly no better example of a work, or a series of works, in which a compulsive fantasy has produced great literature. By the end of the century, the motif of shared bondage and death as a decent and more ecstatic form of coition has become completely explicit — in Hassan, or Les Noyades — and is even present in a muffled form in improbable works like The Last of the Mohicans.

Pegasus, the symbol of imaginative literature, sprang from the blood of the Gorgon. In psychoanalytical terms this seems to be abundantly true, at least of our own literature, but Freud might also have pointed out that it is this particular Gorgon which petrified the emotional development of an entire culture, to make Andromeda's chains more desirable than her person.

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So much for the ancestry of the literary "comic" — what of its present and future? If Freudian concepts account for the content of literary forms, the reasons for their prevalence at a given time seem to be chiefly social.

The sub-sexual pulp novel, with or without an exotic cast, and still more its middle-class equivalents, seem to represent a thoroughgoing return of the European novel to one of its origins, and the arbitrary plot linking a series of sexually-coloured but technically chaste episodes, the displacement of physical sexuality by torments and misfortunes, and the typical irrelevance of the linking commentary, which are the features of this commercial genre today — were present in the works which set the key of the European novel. The Hays Code and its literary progeny were born together. There is no hokum in Hollywood which these early novels do not anticipate, and strikingly little difference in the formula they had to fill, apart from an added requirement of stylistic elaboration.

Hokum is the stock-in-trade of the story teller. It is as necessary to Hemingway as to Heliodorus. It never fails, even with those too highbrow to admit its appeal, and if it appears in

Alexandrine rhetoricians it does so as freely in the Arabian Nights and in Shakespeare. When literary forms lose interest as literature, there is always hokum to fall back on, and it has played a quite remarkable part in providing inspiration for serious writers. The similarity between the late Alexandrine novel and the matter of pulp fiction and television — as well as the cause of its germinal influence on European fiction generally — is in the selection of permissible fantasies.

The natural history of the response to hokum, especially sexual hokum, in our society is more interesting than speculation about its psychodynamics. The cathexis attached to suffering, and especially masochism, seems to be more intense in the audience of "serious" than of popular literature. (A side effect of this is that the tragic dénouement has now a strong prestige significance — it is evidence of "serious" intention, even if it has to be dragged in quite as arbitrarily as the last- minute rescues of romance.) The "serious" work must end on a note of frustration — "happy" endings are stigmatic of a lower form of literature. The algolagnia of popular literature is by contrast of a robust kind. It prefers fights, beatings, bindings and danger-situations which are physical and have to that extent a genital reference: it avoids the much less healthy refinements of purely mental suffering; and masochism is popular only if it does not go too far. Popular self-identification will stand up to a threat of combustion or drowning in aphrodisiac circumstances, and find it agreeable, but it knows where to stop— ecstasies pushed to the point of decease, like those of Laon or Les Noyades, have no future in them. Women, perhaps for physiological reasons, seem willing to venture further: they will accompany the heroine up to and including her actual demise — "What a loverly death to die!", as Nellie Wallace used to sing — but there must be at least a celestial choir between them and the darkness of annihilation.

These sex differences in response and readership have an important effect on popular erotic iconography. Kinsey pointed out that women do not respond erotically to printed matter anything like as predictably as men, and consequently do not read for direct physical stimulation — there is a whole literature addressed to them in which the erotic element is social. Many of the excesses of the "tough" commercial romance are due to the fact that it is addressed only to men: the heroines are expendable, and not for self-identification, while the two-seater fantasy of Tatius and the cinema, by contrast, is to some extent modified by the fact that it must suit readers of both sexes. Other heroines are sacrificed, quite arbitrarily, to an extension of the Hays convention on adultery: the wages of sexuality are death. Even Hemingway's Catherine goes this way.

We seem in one sense, so far as popular fiction is concerned, to be going back, in the inverse sequence which produced the dying lovers of Tatius and Shelley. They are losing popularity: we are back with Andromeda and, in place of Perseus or Prometheus, the gangster-policeman-special agent born under her constellation. Sometimes he will love her, sometimes he will kill her — not infrequently he will do both, and to a succession of women. We are also back (far more significantly) with a limited amount of genital sexuality among all the killings. The genre has been called "sex-and-violence" fiction. It is arranged pyramidically: soft-backed novels on newsprint at the bottom, glossy paper-covers for the middle class, hard-backs for Cabinet Ministers and the established, and even literature at the top.

At the bottom of the pyramid, rape now supplements murder — near the top, Bulldog Drummond has gone into partnership with Lautréamont and developed an explicit sex-life. With the second of these events I for one would not quarrel. From the point of view of mental health the objectionableness of the modern version lies not particularly in the erotic significance it gives to violence, and least of all in the return of some normal love-making, but in its quality of affect-

lessness in brutality. This is alarming because we have seen it recently in real life. Indeed, not all sadistic imagery is cruel, and not all cruelty is sadistic: a good deal of the violence in question is spiteful rather than erotic. The authors of paper-backs do not need to manufacture machinery to revive their corpses — the corpses are perfectly acceptable dead. These corpses, moreover, are not Elizabethan, or even Gothic — they are mechanically and affectlessly produced; they purge no emotions because they excite none. They are simply required as décor to produce potency. In older erotic romances, the plot, however arbitrary, is a means of preserving the decencies, and showing that the game, even if it is bloodthirsty, *is* still a game. The modern romance has no use for nursery games. Accordingly the better it is done, the more alarming it becomes. It may be that there is greater sincerity in accepting the fact that if, in real life, you shoot your woman she will die without benefit of coincidence: modern readers would probably be insulted by mummery with fake bullet-holes, though I think Mr. Fleming, who is nearest of his contemporaries to the spirit of Tatius, would consider them if he had to.

It is worth looking more closely at the sadistic component in this literature, for in reality critical anger over such matter still depends on the content of sex, not the proportion of violence. Let me make it clear that "sex-and-violence" is in all respects an improvement, in my view, on violence alone, even if sex has entered the firm only as a junior partner. Much of literary history since the time of Tatius has been taken up with the attempts of the public to get, and writers to give them, an erotic literature dealing with adult sexual behaviour, and the efforts of a disturbed minority to keep normality out in favour of decent sadism and masochism — to which, as long as they have no genital references, there is no moral objection. If Mr. Spillane had written a contemporary Daphnis and Chloe it would have been banned. Chastelard was indignantly attacked by our grandfathers, not for the hero's erotic rhapsody over decapitation, but because he hid under Queen Mary's bed; and the art of the pornographer, if one can call it that, has long consisted in trying to introduce among decent, patriotic, and even devout abnormality, the elements of normal sex which make it sell.

Sadistic fantasy in a frankly sexual content is itself less mischievous, since less likely to erupt in overt behaviour, than rationalised literary production of sadistic fantasy, and much less infectious by example. There are not many people who imitate Jack the Ripper, and those who do can be segregated; but there are a great many Conservative Party congress delegates who yell their support for flogging, as there are disturbed Americans who regret the decline of the Klan — and they can neither be segregated nor shamed.

We can see another and more specifically sexual origin for pulp novel violence in the stereotype of the heroines — or the lay figures — with whom the routine of sex-and-violence is enacted. At least they are responsive. They rub themselves against the impending ravisher like cats; they throb, bite, scratch and emit ecstatic cries — they are the women of the Sanskrit erotic textbooks, which classify with great thoroughness several dozen varieties of love-bites, excitatory scratch-marks, erotic blows, and exclamations in intercourse. These women behave, in short, as women of some cultures appear to have behaved, as the reader's girl friend or wife does not behave, and as he very probably wishes she would. Geoffrey Gorer remarks of sex-and-violence literature that "despite all the prohibitions of convention and law people do acquire sexual experience, and for the greater part find out that they have been stuffed with lies — that though pleasant it is not such lasting ecstasy and final solution as art would leave us to suppose; and then they are ready for the other half of our myth, violence". (Bali and Angkor 1936).

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It looks as if the hard-back and soft-back readers have one anxiety in common, whether they ravish women or only bite them: the object of the violence in each case is to secure response, unnecessary, one would have thought, with such provocative women, unless it is only a game. But whereas in real life these lovers would recover their breath, a little bruised and embarrassed by their own vehemence, the characters of fiction keep up the same pre-orgasmal frenzy in their other activities.

These activities are brutal, and either criminal or justified because the persons assaulted are criminals. This consequence flows directly from the other sources of the popularity of the genre at all levels of society. Society conscripts the unestablished reader and kicks him around — if we were not too well brought up we would kick society back: established or unestablished respectability has an ill-defined association with the disappointing frigidity of our women: rough stuff, in our folklore, at least makes women respond, if only by protest. Therefore let us imagine ourselves gangsters, able to kick society, occupationally brutal, whose women are disreputably responsive — if not the mis-fortunes of virtue, at least the prosperities of vice. Better, if we have something substantial to lose from gangsterism, let us be a law above the law — we can then beat the gangsters (who deserve it) and enjoy their women, with a genuflection to righteousness — we have a civilised dislike for violent criminals in real life, and in any case we do not want to be sent down as delinquents.

Erotic sub-fiction is getting steadily more sophisticated, and, at the same time, coming to reflect middle-class tastes in fantasy: — masochism instead of sadism, and modern plumbing. The heroines of paper novels in the 1900's were seduced by their creator's idea of a rich waster in their audience's idea of a Mayfair flat. The new conventions are increasingly those of readers with some experience of love-making in conditions of privacy and with running hot water. At the top of the pyramid the backs are no longer paper, and the experience of the fictional heroes greater. Mr. Fleming's "James Bond", the most experienced of these heroes, and an ex-Naval Commander, does not — I think I am right in saying — commit rape, nor imagine that he can conveniently undress a woman by brute force. He confines himself to willing subjects and has the sense to ask first if they are virgins, though he may bite them as a purely erotic stimulus. The rest of his time is occupied, not so much in killing people, as in being tortured. It is the tone of officerly experience which does the damage here, for it extends to all the masochistic routines which the eponymous hero undergoes, often in confined spaces which suggest a Rankian birth-trauma — or, more probably, memories of engine-room duty. That it is masochism, rather than sadism, is itself an indication of a genre rising in the world and covering-up a little; recently the fantasy is schizoid rather than doggedly mechanical. The soft-back reader, by contrast, still has a realistic perception that in matter of fact it is more blessed to give than to receive, whatever happens in fantasy.

I cannot help feeling that the masochism of the Establishment is not so much decency as cover. It has the ominous half-in-earnest air which "interrogated" persons describe in real-life tormentors. Mr. Fleming's hero chivalrously plays the victim, but I would not trust him to question any Cypriots, of either sex. The Alexandrine hero was spineless, perhaps, but decent and unofficial. The Elizabethan villain — Aaron or Vargas — was painfully moral in his Crowleyan protestations of deliberate wickedness. He does not stand for the approved conduct of society, nor represent the product of a bad upper-class school. But the "special agent" who tortures suspects, ravishes women and for preference shoots them afterwards, is the emissary of Society — or at least he stands for authority and its uses, for the unlimited rights of aggressive behaviour

which it confers, and he is expected to carry the admiring acquiescence of his readers. The modern erotic hero at the establishment level is a professional, official, and, in Britain, upper-class bully with enough masochism in him to make him obedient and a little less aware of other people's feelings. When he is cynical, as in Mr. Spillane, one can take him as a satire; he is at his least loveable when he is attached to illiterate, contemporary political stereotypes — Bulldog Drummond's "pacifists" or Mr. Fleming's "Russians" and "chingroes" (half-Chinese, half-Negro), even in a schizophrenic background. Un-fortunately he is also at his most realistic; history is anticipating fantasy. If John Buchan's Richard Hannay was a secret agent and a gentleman, his duties did not in those days include conducting "interrogations" on the Algerian pattern, and taking turns at undergoing them, or inflicting them on his colleagues, by way of training. The world demand for such heroes seems to be increasing rapid as henchmen for chaster and better-rationalised delinquents. Literature will not create them, but it could conceivably educate them. No well-read adolescent, even if he has never been trained to fight "terrorists", would now need to go back to Damhouder's Praxis Rerum Criminalium to find out how to torture somebody. The attitude of such hero-villains to women is of a piece with the rest of their activities. The Greek Perseus left Andromeda on her rock while he haggled with her parents — Mr. Fleming's hero would certainly rescue her, but might make love to her in situ: Mr. Spillane's hero, who "specialises in shooting women in the belly" would presumably rape her first and give her to the monster afterwards.

Much has been made of the class background of the official hero. I doubt if he has any political planning behind him. He has appeared, like all literary figures, in response to the general climate of the times, even if that includes the class anxieties which George Orwell saw in him. But he meets a need of government (all government) which a genuinely erotic literature — one, that is, concerned primarily with the physical expression of love rather than hate — cannot meet. The selectivity of censorship towards sex and in favour of violence has for the most part unconscious origins — but, at the same time, it is no accident that the sort of people who demand an assexual literature are often also the sort of people who control governments and are willing to condone violence by proxy — the springs of prudery, of brutality and of ambition are very often the same. And even if leaderships are not drawn, like volunteer censorships, from emotionally-handicapped people, obedient violence will in any case be more popular with administrations than love. They need manly (and unscrupulous) men; it is not easy to fit the individual who "hugs his kicksy-wicksy here at home, that should sustain the bound and high curvet of Mars his fiery steed" into the machine of comic-book politics. He is lacking in proper offensive spirit — mushy, in fact. Men who get more pleasure from beating up Cypriots, Algerians or Hungarians than from staying at home with the girls are an administrative godsend — men in love, by contrast, tend to be at once tiresomely unwarlike in the cause of Civilisation and violently combative in resisting civic privileges such as conscription or deportation. In fact, when a man does hit back at the machine, love, not principle, is usually behind it.

To this extent the change from last century's recipe of violence alone, the prescribed material for generating manly youths with no sentimental nonsense about them, seems to represent an advance in erotic fiction if only a small one. If the authors of literary comics are working off abnormal preoccupations, I doubt if their readers are — to anything like the same extent. There are several possible reasons other than endemic formal sadism for the popularity of literary violence with the audience — conscripts, young industrial workers, clerks — who are the chief readers of paper-backed novels. (I am less satisfied about the readers of hard-backed novels.) One is the exasperation of current affairs, of life in a society which is two-faced, run by advertisers

and confidence men who talk glibly about terminating human history if necessary, and who are equipped with powers of conscription — a society nonetheless in which, through the advent of order and of humane ideas, there are no accessible heads to punch. The bears, dogs and cocks which our ancestors maltreated are protected today against transferred aggression as effectively as Prime Ministers and Secretaries of State, and much more justly. Zeus had a police escort — even the vulture has the Wild Birds Protection Act behind it.

This is the result of a real and important gain in humane sensibility and in civilised behaviour. The ages of faith discharged their irrational aggressions in austerity and persecution; the eighteenth century, to judge from its sports and punishments, in public brutality. We have largely renounced these activities — the super-irrationalities and nuclear weapons and the Cold War do not replace them, because these are primarily the fabrication of a very small minority of persons in office, foisted by them on publics which are at least uneasy and at the most quiescent. There is no private outlet for irrational aggression compatible with our self-respect. The proper alternative is to trans-mute it into rational direct action, purposive and if possible level-headed resentment against abuses, and if necessary against persons, which will bring the rest of society into line with its own moral pretensions. But this is much too hard a discipline for most intellectuals, and the eighteen-year-old conscript, facing the entire apparatus of stage-management, beset by the traps set for him by political leaders, and unused to concerted action without orders, finds this task of transmuting mere resentment into political action intellectually difficult, personally dangerous, and often beyond him altogether. Could one help him? One could certainly try. Commercial popular art studies the natural history of its audience very carefully. More dedicated writers might learn to do the same.

Nordau predicted that humanity would eventually cease to produce art altogether and took as an example the way in which dancing, which is the most important and significant cultural activity in primitive societies, has steadily lost significance until it has become an amusement. Nordau was not a very amiable critic, and I think this view greatly mis-conceives the nature of art, but what Nordau says here of art in general is certainly true of individual art forms, and I think it might well be true of the novel. We now produce two kinds of literature, popular and unpopular. While in our public mind most of us wish to write unpopular literature, because it is honourable to do so, we hope at the same time that its unpopularity will not be enough to prevent it from being sold, or at least from being published. Art forms are subject to natural selection, and it is a matter of eventual fact that work which cannot be published will not be written: writing for a non-existent audience is as barren a satisfaction as praying to a non-existent God. Several factors are now conspiring to increase the unpopularity of fictional genres which could formerly hold their own — the economics of publishing, the disappearance of the audience to whom the former novels were addressed, and the change of public taste.

The novel is a story with some reference to real life — which may not be more than a starting point. I think there are fundamentally only three kinds of novelistic story, special cases apart — three essences, if you like, which can be used to flavour it. There is the social novel, the prose equivalent of comedy or of tragedy, which makes its effect by appealing to our sympathy and experience of ourselves and our neighbours: there is the picaresque novel, which appeals to our need for adventure and rebellion — and there is the erotic novel, which appeals to our sexuality, with its shadow, the anti-erotic novel. The blends and permutations of these themes have been sufficient to sustain the novel as an art form through its whole development. There is a fourth, which is getting common, and which it is in fact increasingly hard to avoid writing: that is the

novel which is realistic, but the reality which it depicts is fantasy come to life and enacted in history. In our lifetime a writer possessed by an incubus — the obsessive-compulsive fantasy of Kafka, for example, or the sadistic fantasy of Mirbeau — does not need to invent a situation in which it can be expressed; other similarly preoccupied people in positions of authority are already busy expressing these fantasies in current affairs. Kafka depicting his prison camp, digging his burrow, or trying to get into the castle is relying on his imagination, but today he could equally well be writing documentaries. Mirbeau's erotic torture does not now need to be set in the imaginary Orient. He could almost be writing recent history or biography, and I suspect that one could find current documentary parallels within one day's flying-time of London.

The social ingredient in fiction has helped in the past to keep it on the rails, but it is becoming harder and harder to use, because it depends to some extent on a settled state of society and values. People today read the social novels of the past. If in a contemporary setting one substitutes individual psychology for manners, the result approaches one of the other genres I have mentioned. The picaresque ingredient, in so far as it concerns adventure, particularly the adventures of rebels and masterless men, is again being overtaken by actuality — and actuality is more to the taste of modern readers.

The neotechnic society may well have very little interest in the social novel based on class and character. It seems quite possible that it will prefer to polarise its literary interests between actuality on the one hand and comic-book fantasy on the other. If so Nordau's analogy with dancing will be more than apt, for the only social use which dancing retains, out of its many former uses, is erotic. That does not mean that society will be able to do without other serious art forms — Brave New World, in fact — it might well read the novels of the past, as we read epic poetry of the past, and re-use them in its own tradition. But for anyone to write epic poetry today is evidence of a lack of literary judgment: the unpopular novel of today may be written tomorrow only as the analogue to morris-dancing.

Huxley's prediction was perceptive, because his Brave New World had nominally got rid of psychopathology in private life and of psychopathology in office, albeit by means which reflect Huxley's own scepticism about the possibility of doing so. Future society with nuclear weapons must control both in fact if it is to survive at all, but its success may be partial only — the most frightening risk is that the fantastic-realistic genre of the future will go on being written as now in actual events, not ink, by deranged people who are enacting fantasy instead of discharging it in literature.

The characteristically modern genre of the fantastic is, I suppose, science-fiction. This was originally no more than an imaginative forecast of the possibilities of science, but it has been captured by its literary ancestors, just as the non-scientific romance has been captured by the erotic comic. At one extreme the two are not very different, with jargon playing the part of magic in pre-industrial fantasy, space travel as an erotic setting, and the mad scientist, who is a compound of Prometheus and Faust, playing the part of the wizard at the other, science fiction has become the vehicle through which more than one scientist who is not mad has tried to draw attention to the social activities of non-scientists who are. Nobody has yet made quite this use of the comic — except Voltaire. There is no room here to pursue the ancestry of Utopias and of science fantasy turned satire — it begins perhaps with Lucian and with the Golden Ass and reaches us via More and Gulliver, who stand in the same relation to comic-book science as Candide does to comic-book romance: both owe their sting to the convergence between fantasy and history. Just as Kafka and Mirbeau now sound unpleasantly factual, it is hard to tell whether

some of the fantasies of science fiction are paranoiac or merely satirical — the slug-like invaders from outer space who parasitise the will and intelligence by attaching themselves to the base of our skulls come from the same source as the electrical waves by means of which unseen enemies influence the certifiably insane — until we read that as a protection against their activities the U.S. Senate agrees to meet stripped to the waist[5], and we find ourselves if not in real life at least close to it,

As I see it, the novel-writer today faces this problem: he has an audience which is increasingly demanding a literary separation of actuality from imagination, but he has also to cope with a triangular relationship between fiction as a vehicle for pure fantasy, fantasy-fiction as a vehicle for satire on society, and a society which is compelled by its leaders to enact pathological fantasies in fact. I have been talking about popular fiction — it may well be that those who wish to write unpopular fiction will opt out, and we shall have the same situation as exists in poetry, which now makes little attempt to address any audience outside the lecture room. There is a certain amount of self-satisfaction to be had from accepting the Third Programme as a ghetto, but the tenure of a literary form which lives on these terms is, to say the least, shaky.

The alternative is to write popular fiction. I think it is safe to say that there is no functioning art form, however poor its execution, which cannot be exploited if one has enough ingenuity. And in any case the process is already in train. If the erotically comic-book genre is growing up from below, the unpopular novel is coming down from above to meet it. Ever since Freud, motif has been steadily gaining at the expense of manner. The notion of writing "popular" fiction as edification suggests the cleaned-up comic-book, in which, instead of secular bloodshed, David slaughters Goliath and Joan of Arc is burned at the stake. My intention here, though less specific than that, is more promising: if only the romance will be read, if motifs are to matter more than treatment, if literature is to be got in edgeways between them, at least the requirements are not more stringent than those stylisations which myth and ceremony imposed on Greek, or Elizabethan taste and politics on Tudor, drama. We need to study the natural history of literature today, not to acquire riches, or not only to acquire riches, but to accept the challenge which social changes always impose on writers; when the philistine says "You must," to reply "I have — see how you like that!" If I knew how to write the type of fiction which would fulfil these requirements today, I would write it — making the assumptions which I have made here, that neurotic anxieties and immaturity are common property, but that my audience is saner than its censors and its leaders, and that the destructive emphasis in literature, as well as in history, are to some extent imposed upon it. Godwin tried to do precisely this in Caleb Williams and St. Leon. If he did not make anarchism popular, at least he inspired Shelley. Graham Greene has attempted the same thing, but without using the crudely fetishistic techniques which the medium really demands. I would rather write like Longus than like Mr. Fleming, but if editors, readers or censors compel me to write like Mr. Fleming in order to be heard — or for that matter like the conformist colleagues of Pasternak — I would make a fair offer to turn any imposed restrictions into horrid arms against their originators.

Not all writers will share my assumptions. But most of them will recognise the symptoms I have described, the depletion, as it were, of the novel and the tendency for it to break up into its component literary genres, and to become a habit-forming drug. The novel has been the literary form par excellence of the period which gave us liberalism and science, but also industrialism and

[5] R. Heinlein, The Puppet-Masters (New York: Doubleday, 1951).

totalitarianism. How much it contributed as a social influence to these gains and losses I would not like to say. Any social influence it had might now be transferred elsewhere. At the same time, as long as stories are read, regardless of what is in them, fiction is still a possible medium.

If, moreover, like so many good people, we are depressed by popular fiction today, or by some alarming things in it, we should remember that Prometheus is not the only signal of cruelty, and Faustian competition to enact the fantasies of deranged people is not the only function of science. Shelley's answer is the right one. Science has made it possible for us to understand some of the relations between psychosymbolism in literature and behaviour in society, or at least to look for them. It has also, by the same token, made it possible to envisage turning psycho-pathology out of history, whether or not we can or should turn it out of literature. What we require is the will. And if indeed the audiences for whom we write are saner than their leaders, and saner than their literature, the writer today, like the doctor and the psychiatrist, has a duty of incitement as well as consolation — for, in Tatius' terms, if Herakles can unbind Prometheus we will not have to worry about the misfortunes of virtue.

Alex Comfort
Sex-and-violence and the origin of the novel
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