

On Purpose and Propaganda

Katharine's response to an American post-graduate research student's inquiry on her purpose in writing established the core of her personal philosophy on the role of literature, although the emphasis on one aspect or another varied through the years.

FICTION IN literature, according to dictionary definition, connotes "all works of the imagination, particularly novels and romances." But as language changes with the evolution of society and its forms of expression, I consider the term "fiction" no longer implies literary work which is entirely imaginative in conception. The term "fantasy" more aptly conveys to the mind of our generation literary work based on imaginative flights removed from actuality.

Nowadays, fiction seems to cover novels, plays and short stories which have some basis in history or reality; but do not present the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in relation to the characters, environment and movement of the episodes involved. Only biographies, histories, and the descriptions of scientific and geographical explorations are expected to be given, on oath, as it were. And yet literary value attaches chiefly, these days, to works of fiction which approximate to reality; which are capable of gathering up the threads of experience and presenting them in a pattern that has the quality of life itself: is as a matter of fact, a fragment torn from the whole.

Only in proportion as the weaver is sensible of the

stuff which goes to make up the existence of people is his own time, of the legacy of the past and of the Promethean spirit of man which assails the future, can his work have any permanent value or power, it seems to me. In other words, a writer does not reach and impress the consciousness of others unless he himself has been stirred and driven by all the issues involved; unless, also, he has learnt the most effective means to express his individual vision. "Words – the technical verbal part of literature is simply a development of magic," Aldous Huxley says. A writer's magic, I think, lies in his or her use of words.

What is my purpose in writing? It is difficult to say. I have been writing since I was a child. First of all, it may have been the necessity to crystallize for myself some scene or incident that pleased me, aroused my pity or enquiring mind. Later, I think, I wanted to make others realise the beauty and inwardness of things I loved: see with me the splendid qualities in ordinary people. The hard and vigorous lives of country folk appealed to me. I felt that in these lives was the essence of all heroism and romance. Latterly, I have begun to recognise that country folk too often present a way of escape for writers unwilling to face the sordid realities of city life; its complex of heroism and high romance in the struggle for existence.

Understanding that "Life rests hard down on the physical basis of things" and that this physical basis is determined by economics, brought me a sense of the universal in individual and national manifestations. These convictions only deepened and strengthened my instinctive conception of the writer as a medium for the expression of ultimate truths to the people: one who having some spark of the Promethean fire, sympathy with and an intense love for people in general – humanity, it may be said – seeks their fulfilment and perfecting as the driving force of being.

The writer's approach to the people may be either by

the direct statement of facts or by the indirect method of attempting to recreate the cosmos in the lives of a group of people in a given place and time. The indirect method, in my opinion should be the method of writers of fiction who use the novel and short stories to stir and convince their readers of real values in life. But in doing so, I believe that writers must remain faithful to their material. It is their material, the stuff they present which must sway emotion and intelligence, not any preaching or obvious propaganda purpose.

I agree that all great works of literature are propagandist in essence. They are so because they dominate the consciousness of the reader, through the mind of the writer and his interpretation of life and its values; but to obtrude a propaganda purpose is to make it ineffective.

The objective of any serious writer should be to galvanise readers into an awareness of the causes which underlie frustration and tragedy, so that the comment arises: "Well, this is life. What do I think about it? What can be done about it?"

What is propaganda? Here again the meaning of words has suffered a subtle change. Propaganda used to mean "the spreading of a certain set of ideas or principles." Today, I think the word has come to have another significance.

Certainly, I am propagandist, if that is so, and all writers of any consequence have been propagandist, whether they are conscious of it or not. It is impossible for the work of an individual brain not to bear the impression of that brain, either in its triviality or grandeur. But today, the word propaganda has acquired another significance, that is of a bald and blatant partisanship in relation to any particular set of ideas or principles.

The question of propaganda, as it concerns the writer, it seems to me is one of method. As an individual, as an essayist, as a public speaker, as a reporter, a writer may be baldly and blatantly partisan. He may use the direct

approach to the emotion and intelligence of his audience. As a novelist he sets out to show not his own, but the reactions of others to the experiences and circumstances of their lives, and therefore his method should be indirect – providing circumstantial evidence, as it were, and leaving conclusions to the gentle reader. There is no doubt that in choosing the persons and theme of a novel, a writer selects those for which he has some predilection and that they move in accordance with his own interpretation of the realities of their environment.

It appears to me nonsense therefore to say as D.H. Lawrence does that “Morality in the novel is the trembling instability of the balance. When the novelist puts his thumb in the scale to pull the balance down to his own predilection, that is immorality.” Every novel worth anything bears the imprint of the potter’s thumb. All the novels of D.H. Lawrence do.

“Art for Art’s sake,” I find a cliché, superficial and illogical.

A work of art, I conceive to be some supreme expression of some beauty, truth, terror, or degradation in nature: a recreation by the human agent of such a model or state of mind. Only in its capacity to reach the human objective is it of value. I cannot accept the thing created as of more importance than the creator or the human complex to which it must be referred.

“Art for Art’s sake”, becomes a mere rattle of words to soothe the vanity of ineffectual artisans who play with the tools of expression, but are too indolent or limited in faculty to fathom the sources of vital knowledge. Art to me is a revelation of human greatness in expression, and for humanity’s sake.

Literature for self-expression? This does not seem to me a sufficient motive for writing. The self after all is so small a mote in the ocean of being. But the striving of the self for unity with the universal flow, this may be the conscious or unconscious impulse of many writers: identification

with the life force as it drives on through the ages.

Perhaps it is mine; and for that reason, I would not be content to express merely myself, but am impelled to interpret the life and ways of the people of my own time and people, in their essential aspects: the struggle for existence and organization for a social system which will enable them to grow in beauty and strength of mind and body, in knowledge and reason, with all the spiritual blossoming that involves.

I do not write for material gain, merely, because I could make much more money than I do by writing, if I would do the sort of work that pays. And yet I have to earn my living as a writer.

Rodin conveys my attitude towards Art when he says: “L’art c’est le plus sublime mission de l’homme puisque c’est l’exercice de la pensee qui cherche de comprendre le monde et a le faire comprendre.”

Characterisation and environment seem to me of more importance than any other factor in a novel, and that the movement should be in accordance with them. Plot is an artificial means of stimulating interest which modern writers, dealing with characters and circumstances of vital interest can afford to dispense with. The course of a life, or happening, dominated by the stirring realities of our time, needs no artificial structure to sustain it. Indeed the suggestion of artificiality in construction of a plot, may even destroy an impression of reality in an otherwise sincere and sensitive work.

I prefer always to live among the people and places I write of: use notes taken at the time, and try to discover the thoughts and reactions of people under my microscope to situations they have been through, or may have to encounter. The law of libel necessitates variations from the original, of course. Otherwise, I am concerned to draw as I see.