

THE CRAFT OF FICTION

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The Craft of Fiction by Percy Lubbock

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PERCY LUBBOCK

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I

To grasp the shadowy and fantasmal form of a book, to hold it fast, to turn it over and survey it at leisure—that is the effort of a critic of books, and it is perpetually defeated. Nothing, no power, will keep a book steady and motionless before us, so that we may have time to examine its shape and design. As quickly as we read, it melts and shifts in the memory; even at the moment when the last page is turned, a great part of the book, its finer detail, is already vague and doubtful. A little later, after a few days or months, how much is really left of it? A cluster of impressions, some clear points emerging from a mist of uncertainty, this is all we can hope to possess, generally speaking, in the name of a book. The experience of reading it has left something behind, and these relics we call by the book's name; but how can they be considered to give us the material for judging and appraising the book? Nobody would venture to criticize a building, a statue, a picture, with nothing before him but the memory of a single glimpse caught in passing;

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yet the critic of literature, on the whole, has to found his opinion upon little more. Sometimes it is possible to return to the book and renew the impression; to a few books we may come back again and again, till they do in the end become familiar sights. But of the hundreds and hundreds of books that a critic would wish to range in his memory, in order to scrutinize and compare them reflectively, how many can he expect to bring into a state of reasonable stability? Few indeed, at the best; as for the others, he must be content with the shapeless, incoherent visions that respond when the recollection of them is invoked.

It is scarcely to be wondered at if criticism is not very precise, not very exact in the use of its terms, when it has to work at such a disadvantage. Since we can never speak of a book with our eye on the object, never handle a book—the real book, which is to the volume as the symphony to the score—our phrases find nothing to check them, immediately and unmistakably, while they are formed. Of a novel, for instance, that I seem to know well, that I recall as an old acquaintance, I may confidently begin to express an opinion; but when, having expressed it, I would glance at the book once more, to be satisfied that my judgment fits it, I can only turn to the image, such as it is, that remains in a deceiving memory. The volume lies before me, no doubt, and if it is merely a question of detail, a name or a scene, I can find the page and verify my sentence. But I cannot catch a momentary sight of the book,

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the book itself; I cannot look up from my writing and sharpen my impression with a straight, unhampered view of the author's work; to glance at a book, though the phrase is so often in our mouths, is in fact an impossibility. The form of a novel—and how often a critic uses that expression too—is something that none of us, perhaps, has ever really contemplated. It is revealed little by little, page by page, and it is withdrawn as fast as it is revealed; as a whole, complete and perfect, it could only exist in a more tenacious memory than most of us have to rely on. Our critical faculty may be admirable; we may be thoroughly capable of judging a book justly, if only we could watch it at ease. But fine taste and keen perception are of no use to us if we cannot retain the image of the book; and the image escapes and evades us like a cloud. (1)

We are so well accustomed to this disability that I may seem to make too much of it. In theory, certainly, the book is never present in the critic's mind, never there in all its completeness; but enough of it, in a commonly good memory, remains to be discussed and criticized—the book as we remember it, the book that survives, is sufficient for practical purposes. Such we assume to be the case, and our criticism is very little troubled by the thought that it is only directed at certain fragments of the book which the author wrote, the rest of it having ceased to exist for us. There is plenty to say of a book, even in this condition; for the hours of our actual

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exposure to it were full and eventful, and after living for a time with people like Clarissa Harlowe or Anna Karenina or Emma Bovary we have had a lasting experience, though the novels in which they figured may fall away into dimness and uncertainty. These women, with some of the scenes and episodes of their history, remain with us as vividly as though we had known them in life; and we still keep a general impression of their setting and their fortunes, a background more or less undefined, but associated with the thought of them. It all makes a very real and solid possession of a kind, and we readily accept it as the book itself. One does not need to remember the smaller detail of the story to perceive the truth and force of the characters; and if a great deal is forgotten, the most striking aspects of the case will linger in the mind as we look back. Dramatic episodes, fine pieces of description, above all the presence of many interesting and remarkable people—while there is so much that instantly springs to light when the book is mentioned, it seems perverse to say that the book is not before us as we write of it.

✓ The real heart and substance of the book, it might even be urged, stands out the more clearly for the obscurity into which the less essential parts of it subside.

And true it is that for criticism of the author's genius, of the power and quality of his imagination, the impressions we are able to save from oblivion are material in plenty. Of Richardson