

A LETTER  
TO A  
MODERN NOVELIST

HUGH WALPOLE

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# A LETTER TO A MODERN NOVELIST

HUGH WALPOLE

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*March 17th, 1932.*

MY DEAR RICHARD,

I received your letter yesterday before leaving Tunis. I was touched, I must confess, that you should take the trouble to write to me at such length because you have often told me that you detest to write letters and have never ceased to wonder that my great-great-Uncle Horace found so much leisure to amuse himself in that fashion. But what frankly astonishes me yet more is that you should care to have my opinion on your book. I received it, as I wrote and told you, an hour before leaving London and I read it between Calais and Marseilles. I would have written to you before this, burdening you with my honest if not very original opinions, had it not been that I doubted quite frankly whether you would be interested to have them. It is true that you sent me the book, that you even inscribed in it: "For Hugh Walpole from a Beginner"—but forgive me if my sensitive spirit saw even in those simple words a good-natured and only too inevitable patronage. Don't misunderstand me. I was pleased and touched that you should think of me at all. I have my full share of the pathetic nostalgia on the part of the aged for the tender consideration of the young. But I could not believe that you cared whether I read the book or no.

Now it seems from your letter that you do. You say that it has been well received, that all your friends like it, that your publisher has given a luncheon and that Mr. Agate, the dramatic critic, has awarded it two columns in the *Express* although, with regard to that last, why you should care what a dramatic critic has to say to your novel I cannot understand. However, when we are young we care what *everyone* has to say, although we pretend not to—and when we are old, too, perhaps! Of the sensitiveness and vanity of authors there is no end nor ever will be! However, with all this success flaming about your ears you still want my opinion although, as you quite honestly confessed to me at Seabrook when we were there together last month: "All that *your* school of novelists has to say about the novel seems to us nonsense"—by "us" meaning I suppose your entire generation and by "*my* school" meaning two or three doddery old fellows who have shamefully outstayed their welcome. All the same I'm only forty-eight, you know, and *feel* as though I were just beginning, so in a way we step out together and can be as frank with one another as the Siamese twins! Well, I *will* be frank! Now that you have all this praise, frankness won't disturb you and as in *any* case *all* my opinions are nonsense one or two of them, honestly delivered, won't damage you a bit!

From all this you will think that I have nothing but curses for your *Camel with Four Humps*—not at all; I have quite a number of blessings. But I am able, happily, to write in the most comfortably detached fashion. I feel at the moment completely removed both from heaven and earth, for the small cargo-boat on which I am travelling from Tunis to Gabes is floating along towards Sousse in a quite immaterial

fashion like a little grey cloud swimming between other clouds. It is true that there is a large brown horse, destined for some Tripoli sportsman, tethered on the deck just outside the Saloon and every once and again he stamps with his hoofs just to reassure himself against the sea; there is a group of Arabs squatting on the other side of the funnel and eagerly excited in some mysterious gamble; the little Japanese steward has just brought me some tea in the grimmest most steel-clad teapot I have ever beheld outside a London boarding-house. Turgenev's *Smoke* and Dr. Donne's poems and the last romance of Miss Dorothy Sayers are piled together on the shelf opposite just to prove that even now, after thirty years of literature, I am still cultured: but these, and more than these, fail to bring me to earth. I am in perfect state to survey your *Camel* without prejudice, without that enthusiasm for which I am so unjustly famous, without that condescension inherited by me from a hundred schoolmasters, without that sentiment that would drive me to placate the younger generation at all costs.

There is another reason, too, why this is an excellent moment to tell you what I think of your *Camel*. I have in these last few days read yet once again Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers*, a book I remember that you told me you *could* not read in spite of the present Trollope revival and the excellent works on that gentleman by Mr. Michael Sadleir and myself. The fact that I had written a book about him made him, I fancy, all the harder for you to read, but the sentence from you that sticks in my memory ran something like this: "You see what makes all those old boys impossible is that they leave off where Proust and Joyce and Lawrence begin." I remember that I enquired whether you included

Flaubert, Tolstoi, Dostoeffsky, Turgenev and Stendhal among those same "old boys" and that you answered airily: "Oh! I'm talking about the *English* novel!" I recollect that I wanted then to say a lot of things, but was most fortunately interrupted by the dressing-bell. I can still see your look of relief when you heard it! But what I wanted to say *then* I can pour out to you *now*—being, as I have told you, so completely detached with only the champing horse, the gambling Arabs and the thin red line of the African coast to prejudice me, and your *Camel* and Trollope's Mrs. Proudie lying down so decently together in my parochial mind.

Well, in the first place, as you have never read *Barchester Towers* I will very briefly give you its subject. It is the story of a battle for power in an English cathedral-town. The battle is engaged between a number of different persons—a Bishop, his wife, the Bishop's secretary, a proud Archdeacon, a Beauty from Italy, a mild and humble little clergyman. An important London newspaper lends its aid and there is a chorus of gentle country gossip. The issues involved are small compared with the fate of nations or Einstein, but they are also symbolic, although Trollope knew little and cared less about symbolism. The battle fought in Barchester for wealth, position, lust of the flesh, is being fought at this instance between China and Japan, between Hitler and Hindenburg, and between, I don't doubt, the two Arabs who are at this moment wildly gesticulating on the Quay of Sousse whither we have now arrived. Such is the theme of *Barchester Towers*. What, dear Richard, is the theme of *Camel with Four Humps*?

At first I must confess that, accustomed as I am to the present school of English novelists from Joyce to, shall I say, Richard Benson, I find it difficult *exactly* to state your theme. You would doubtless prefer that it should be difficult. Henry James used to say that it should be possible to state the theme of any novel in one short quick sentence. "That," he expected you to say, "is the pattern in *this* carpet." I think perhaps he was right; at any rate he himself obeyed his own law faithfully, and even that most mysterious of all novels *The Sacred Fount* can be defined in a word or two. But *yours!*

The theme, if you will permit me, seems a little uncertain. At first it was, I thought, the one customary to the novelists of your generation, namely that Flesh is as Grass and All is Vanity. Then, as the book developed I fancied with some anticipatory pleasure that the charm of solitude, the contemplative life, the desert, its great advantage over the noise, the chatter and restlessness of contemporary London was your pattern. But no. The desert—as symbolised in the picture of the elegant Camel hanging over the mantel-piece of the drawing-room at Lady Clancarty's—proves most desperately disappointing and it seems for a moment as though Matrimony, decent, conventionalised Victorian Matrimony, is after all the cure for modern malaise. But your Matrimony is worse than your Desert. No one in your novel is married for more than five minutes. At the last there is a touch, a suggestion, of something mystical. Is there, after all, a Soul in Man, and will we all be religious again in another year or two? No, the Soul rises for an instant only to sink at once before a barrage of mockery and we are left gazing as it seems to me rather emptily on the portrait of the Camel, the broken remnants of the dinner-table, the old family nurse

asleep in her chair and Lady Clancarty counting her gains from Contract.

Now to all this you will say at once: "But of course—the Theme of my book is that there *is* no Theme. Life has no Theme. Do you not know that we have got beyond that *arrangement* of the older novelists, the placing of things in order, the punctual rising of the sun, the crisis at its proper time, the ending neatly rounded off? Life was never like that. What we have to do is to render life as it is. To be Real."

Very well. Granted. But let us look again at *Barchester Towers*. Trollope begins his book with this sentence:

"In the latter days of July in the year 185-, a most important question was for ten days hourly asked in the cathedral city of Barchester, and answered every hour in various ways. Who was to be the new Bishop?"

You will, of course, observe the childish meticulousness of that statement. We have the month, and, nearly, the year. We have the place and we have the question that sets all the narrative going. I contend that, having due regard to the obvious old-fashionedness of the method, that is a masterly commencement to any novel. You may say that you are not interested in cathedral towns nor in ecclesiastical dignitaries. No. Quite so. But you *are*, you *must* be interested in human beings. Here is a situation in which there will be inevitably disappointments, jealousies, antagonisms, plots and intrigues. It does not matter whether the impetus that sets this ball rolling is the succession to the Crown, the engagement of an ironical Debutante, the selling of a farm, the betrayal of

a young village beauty. It is the passions that spell the plot and there is room for all the passions here.

What, on the other hand, is the opening sentence of your *Camel*?

*"The bell whose echoes broke the symmetry of the quartet round the bridge-table ceased its sharp querulous anger only just in time, for Lady Clancarty's maid had the colic—indestructably fugitive and the result of a country passion for sheep's head."*

I admit that your opening sentence is intriguing. Its grammar I find to be a little weak, but then I have never been strong on grammar myself. I do not *exactly* understand *what* was "indestructably fugitive." Do you mean that Lady Clancarty's maid was doomed to colic, off and on, so to speak, for the rest of her days? But no matter. The point is, does this sentence stir eager curiosity in the reader's breast? In a sense, yes. The reader must feel that he (or she in all probability) is in the hands of a clever and interesting guide. This should be an amusing world, this world of bridge, bells and indigestion. The silly irony of life is already conveyed. The scene is set. Yes, but there is, I think, something further.

The effect upon the reader of Trollope's opening sentence is exactly the effect of a newspaper paragraph. "Hullo!" you cry, "The Bishop of Barchester is dead! I wonder who his successor will be?" But it is more than that. You not only read the newspaper paragraph, but you are assured that you are about to be informed of all the details of that affair. "Thanks to Mr. Trollope," you are told, "we will be able to

take you right *inside*! He was there from the very beginning. There is nothing that he won't be able to tell you."

You, yourself, on the other hand, say to the reader: "I have something interesting here—something curious and amusing. I shall investigate it, but purely for my own interest remember. If you listen intently you may pick up a thing or two, but I care very little whether you do or no. My interest is in my art. I give you the chance of watching an artist at work."

Now I am not for a moment comparing these two methods of approach with the notion that one is preferable to the other. Not at all. Both I don't doubt are excellent. I would only suggest that when our mutual friend, Harold Nicolson, and others suggest that the novel of the new school in England has not all the readers that it ought to have, there *may* be a reason! Readers are both arrogant and lazy. New novels are flung at their heads every minute of the livelong day. "Read us! Read us! Read us!" the novelists cry and the booksellers, more languidly, cry. Yes, the reader is spoilt and flattered, things are made far too easy for him; it is wrong that he should not respect more ardently the sensitive ambition of the artist. Very good. All, alas! too true. But remember that *because* the general reader is spoilt and lazy and *because* you are clever and sensitive—therefore there is sometimes a gulf, a sad gulf that hinders the proper circulation of cash and notoriety. It is a pity. What will you do about it? Surrender some of your sensitiveness? No, never. The public must be educated. Well—good luck to your ambition!

And now consider, dear Richard (this letter is becoming, I don't doubt, intolerable to you), *Barchester Towers* a little further. In my proper pompous schoolmastery manner let me say something about technique. Here I am at a great disadvantage because, although *you* know well enough what *I* mean by that old-fashioned word, *I* have not the least notion whether you mean anything at all by it! That is to say, is there any arrangement of any kind in the *Camel*? Does any one incident, conversation, detail of dress or furniture or scene prepare for any other? Have you a plan simply in not having a plan? Well, first, before you answer these questions (and it is night now: we are leaving Sousse under a full, yellow African moon; the sea streams like silk away from our boat) let me say one thing about technique in the novel. That there have been until the post-war period, two kinds, conscious and unconscious—and mostly unconscious. Trollope and Turgenev. Although you haven't read Trollope you *have* read Turgenev. I remember that at Seabrook you told me that *Fumée* was like a nice neat sampler worked a hundred years ago by a clean little schoolgirl. *Fumée!* at the heart of which, thirty years ago, for me Irina burnt like a flame! In any case, disregarding these sentimentalities, you will remember how Litvinov returns to his hotel in Baden to find Irina's gift of heliotrope scenting his room and you will remember too how that same heliotrope haunts, with its melancholy and sinister fatality, every page of that book? That seems to me technique of the very finest. Technique, moreover, of which Trollope, of course, is altogether incapable. *His* technique is of the simplest; very often there is none at all. Many of his novels were ruined by that ghastly Victorian necessity that they should stretch to eternity for serial purposes. And stretch they did! Often they are beaten

out so thin that a careless breath of the wind and they are torn into shreds! But it happens that *Barchester Towers* was not serialised and it remains with *The Warden* and *The Last Chronicle* and *The Claverings*, the *tightest* of all the Trollopes. (And am I not perhaps forgetting one of the best in *Framley Parsonage*, a book so fresh and charming and natural that it might stretch out for ever and ever, and yet not weary!) There is in this *Barchester Towers*, I swear, not a single dull moment, although there are several shy-making ones, as when the Widow Bold plays with her infant or yields to the Oxford importunities of Mr. Arabin! Trollope's technique here, though, is quite rightly despised by you or would be had you the tolerance to observe it, for it is nothing more than the simple succession of one incident by another! First, he gives you the arrival of the new Bishop, Dr. Proudie; with him, in attendance, Mrs. Proudie and the red-haired chaplain, Mr. Slope. These three assembled, who is to rule—Mrs. Proudie or Mr. Slope? A simple question but fraught with drama for the cathedral and town whose fates are immediately involved. There is, of course, the Opposition. Trollope was too wary a hand at his business not to know that all you need to awaken the reader's interest is to have two opposing forces, whether they be Napoleon and Wellington at Waterloo or Swann and the hero's grandmother in M. Proust's endless chronicle. The opposition to the Proudies in Barchester is the arrogant Archdeacon on the male side, and the lovely a-moral Signora Neroni on the female. The stage is set. The battle joined. All that is needed after that is a concrete cause for the battle and the position of Warden—for Hiram's Hospital is, following on *The Warden*, ready to hand. Could anything be more simple? A child could do it. I don't at all wonder that your generation,

Richard, find it all too naif for your self-importance. It is right that you should do so, and I agree absolutely with you that the novel ought always to be moving on. Moving on—yes. But, while moving, need it discard so completely gifts that surely add, even now, to its charms? This steady march of event, this move upon move as in a good chess game, when Mrs. Proudie first threatens with her Bishop, Mr. Slope replies with his castle (the *Times* newspaper), Mrs. Proudie screams "Check!" Mr. Slope, sniggering, shows her to be premature, only because of his overweening ambitions to be checkmated after all! Is this simple genius for story-telling altogether so negligible? Homer had it, Chaucer had it, Dante had it, Shakespeare had it—mixed beautifully with other and possibly greater gifts but, all the same, none of those geniuses disdained it!

Of this particular art there is no sign whatever in your *Camel*. There was a moment when your hero, Nathaniel Peace, shrinking from the lady who loves him, is tempted to succumb to the lady who detests him; for an instant I fancied that an event of some sort would be born! But no! Illusory hopes! All that occurs is that the clock strikes, the visit to the Camargo Ballet is a dreadful failure and Nathaniel gives a cup of coffee at a shelter to a prostitute!

My pulse slackens again. Nothing leads me from page to page, although I perceive the cleverness, even the beauty of many occasional sentences. And of that other conscious technique, the technique of *Fumée*, *Bovary*, *Boul-de-Suif*, even of *The Man of Property* that you despise so consumedly, there is also not a trace! Here I suspect quite frankly that you are too lazy. To create a work like *Fumée* in

which, through all the apparently idle and silly chatter of Baden, the love episode of Irina and Litvinov is woven into a perfect and completed pattern needs an intense concentration, a fastidious power of rejection, the deepest emotional feeling. In all these things you are, at present, lacking. You have little concentration, a poor power of rejection and no emotional feeling at all. But then you are very young—there are pieces of dialogue and description in *The Camel* amazing for one so tender! I would not be disturbed if it were not that you have no intention of acquiring these gifts. The artist, you say, must not be too deeply concentrated or he shows too clearly his hand; life, real life, will do the rejecting and accepting for him, and as to emotion you dare not show any lest you should be betrayed into sentimentality.

Were you ever to read *Barchester Towers* you would triumphantly display to me the fearful abysses into which Trollope's sentimentality tumbles him! I will admit them at once: his appalling appeals to the reader, for instance, so that at one point he actually exclaims: "Do not be disturbed, dear reader. Neither Mr. Smith nor Mr. Jones will marry my heroine—for, if they did, where would my novel be?" Or the dreadful scenes in which this same heroine, who is for ever weeping, plays her part? I admit that the Widow Bold offers in her single person an example of all the horrors, sentimental and nauseating, into which the Victorian novel could be betrayed. But no one is asking you to return to such things, dear Richard. Only on a single page in your next novel give me something of the emotions that Tanya's farewell to her lover in *Fumée* gives me (it is a matter of a few lines of dialogue) and I will say no more about emotion.

But here I perceive that I must betray to you my innocent notion of the importance of character-creation in the novel. What a sentence! How portentous! Without a wink, a smile, an ironic nod of the head! I am quite aware of it. I am but just returned (it is Palm Sunday and there is not a ripple on the harbour waters) from the Sfax souks bearing with me a silver whip, a crimson leather blotting-book and a pair of green slippers. Just as, at an inordinate price, I have, once again (after how many earlier resolutions?) bought these tawdry sops to tourists, so in the same fashion I anxiously peer for character into the contemporary novel. It is part of my child-like and always optimistic nature. It leads me again and again to cry: "Ah, this at last is the blotting-book for which I have so long been searching!" or "Into *this* work of art at last I shall plunge my hand and bring out a character!"

From *Barchester Towers* at any rate I am certain of three—three whom nobody, of whatever age, whatever school or country, could possibly deny. Goethe, Sainte-Beuve, Anatole France, Peacock, Amanda Ross (my list is entirely haphazard) faced with Mrs. Proudie, Bishop Proudie and Mr. Harding, must at once acclaim them as living and real persons. No period, no literary fashion, no question of age or youth can make these less real. They are not, perhaps, of the great select company of immortals; I ought not possibly to place them beside the Wife of Bath, Falstaff, Emma Bovary, Old Grandet, Sarah Gamp and the rest. And yet I do not know. Mrs. Proudie at least would not be shy in such company and would send the Wife of Bath and Falstaff to Prayer Meeting without a tremor. Among the greatest or no these three are, within their range, absolutely created.

Now in the *Camel* is there any character of whom honestly I can say this? Honestly and naturally, no. Naturally, because these supremely successful creations are rare and it would be astonishing indeed if you, at your first attempt, were able to provide us with one. All the same, I plunge in my fist and what do I bring forth? Your hero, Nathaniel, your (I suppose) heroine, Miss Winchester, your Lady Clancarty—these three. Now here is a point worth, I am sure, attention: that you have from the beginning handicapped yourself as so many of your generation are doing. Nathaniel is a homosexual, or would be if he had the courage of his unwilling convictions. Miss Winchester is, I understand, a Lesbian. Now I have nothing whatever to urge, on the moral ground, against such a choice. The artist is free to pick where he pleases; every possible element in human nature is at his service. You have in fact shown much insight and delicacy in your analysis of Nathaniel's nature. You have not slobbered him with sentimentality nor have you pretended that his unhappy handicap is an added virtue. Nevertheless you have, I am convinced, halved your chances by choosing for your principal figures the abnormal. The abnormal is the minority and always, so long as this race peoples the earth, will be. You have analysed (with much delicacy I repeat) instincts and emotions that must be foreign to two-thirds of your readers as though you had, in fact, given your heroine a harelip, your hero no legs. I am not pleading for the normal; I am not saying that there have not been in fiction magnificent interpretations of the abnormal, as for example the Alyosha of Dostoeffsky, the Vathek of Beckford, the Heathcliffe of Emily Brontë. I am, nevertheless, certain that in the main, it is the great normal figures that triumph through the world's literature—Othello, Carmen, Bazarov, Dandie Dinmont,

Clarissa, M. Bergeret, Cousin Pons, Prince Andrew, Anna Karenina, Tess and all the others. Trollope is the most normal novelist who ever lived. It is one of his great lucks, in his "Barchester" series, that he gives us no insight into the spiritual conflicts that must have beset his characters. Archdeacon Grantley discovered by Balzac—*what a character he would have been!* Bishop Proudie is a little man intimidated by a dominating wife. Had Turgenev interpreted him to what depths of pathos he might have led us! In Mr. Harding Trollope delves a little deeper: that scene at the close of *Barchester Towers*, so brief and simple when Mr. Harding introduces Mr. Quiverful into the hospital, is worthy of the greatest masters and we feel here, as we sometimes do with Trollope, that it was only the reticences and decencies of his time that prevented him from showing us another and deeper world. Let that be as it may. A novelist's faults and weaknesses belong so finally to his character that they are as important and valuable as his strengths and virtues. A primrose by the river's brim was simply a primrose to Trollope, but for that very reason when he speaks he is sure of touching something that he knows to be true. Mrs. Proudie is real, because we have something of Mrs. Proudie in all of us, but your Nathaniel can be real to a few only and those few not always the most interesting.

Trollope, by his very pedestrianism, is betrayed into exaggerations of which you could never be guilty. How ashamed, for example, you would be to name in a novel of yours the father of a large family Mr. Quiverful, although that crime does not in fact seem to me a greater one than the cheap satire of Ford in Aldous Huxley's recent novel. You reveal your character by a hundred delicate touches. Trollope

frequently uses the blunderbuss. He allows Mr. Slope—an admirable creation—to slip into caricature. You are as afraid of over-emphasis as you are of sentiment.

The Proudie's nevertheless exist *beyond* Trollope. We might meet him at any turn of the street; we speculate on their actions, their fortunes, both before and after the volumes that tell us of them. Your Nathaniel and Miss Winchester do not exist except when you tell us of them. It is Richard Benson who is interesting, not his creations. They interest only *because* of him!

And here your old and dogmatic friend comes to *the* question of all questions. What is reality in the novel? A question surely worth asking once a day at least seeing that for the last twenty years the English novel has been struggling to be nothing else but real—real at all costs, real whatever happens. "Let us throw everything else over but at least achieve reality!"

Now what are we to do in this little matter between you and me? *Barchester Towers* seems altogether real to me (except for certain moments of caricature, and even they smell of the Period, the Hooks, the Hawley Smarts, the Barhams and the rest) while *Camel with Four Humps* seems not real to me at all. You may say that this is a weak "tu quoque," because you have told me, most politely, that it is the unreality of my own romantic novels that makes them so unreadable to yourself. But let us not be personal. Here is a question of the first interest, something that demands a volume rather than the tail-end of a letter like this. We arrive at least at this: that I find your novel unreal just as you find

mine to be so, but we *both* agree that *Barchester Towers* is real. (You *would* do so if you read it and I think that after this long pleading letter you really must do so.) Everyone, I fancy, will grant the reality of the Trollope novel. Yes, but you will at once say—"A cheap, easy newspaper reality. I read this morning in the *Daily Herald* that Mr. MacDonald's eyesight is improved and that his daughter, Ishbel, entertained yesterday his friends at luncheon. It is *that* kind of reality. No more and no less." A little more, I think. Mrs. Proudie and Mr. Harding go beyond the *Herald's* creative power—but I will grant you that Trollope's art is a sort of newspaper reality. *Dichtung und Wahrheit*—the Dream and the Business. There *are* two realities and you are not even attempting Trollope's *Wahrheit*. You are a poet. Granted. Every novelist to-day *must* be a poet. In that at least you may maintain we have advanced since Trollope's day. And the poet will certainly find it more difficult to create a general reality than a simple recorder will. A very good chapter in *Barchester Towers* describes the opening of the Ullathorne Sports, the preparations, the anxieties of host and hostess, the too-early arrival of certain guests, the somewhat snobbish distinctions between class and class, local jealousies and so on. All as clear and sharply defined as a summer morning in an English vicarage. I take a chapter at random from your *Camel*, and what is contained in it? A description of a lady's dress, the scent of flowers, nostalgia on the part of your hero for the black rocks of Assouan, a reflection on François Mauriac, a sniff of Paris, the maid-servant's colic, a brilliant jade necklace, two cocktails and a burst of ill-temper on the part of Miss Winchester. This is, I think you will agree, an unprejudiced description of Chapter VIII of your book. Some of the things you give me are beautiful—the rocks of

Assouan, the jade necklace, the hot smell of carnations and morning coffee on a summer's morning in Paris. Trollope could give me none of these things. But instead he gives me something that, whether he is there or no, must always be real. Miss Thorne and her brother, their anxieties, their feudalism, their generousities, their obstinacies—here is a fragment of English character true for ever and a real possession. Whereas you, dear Richard, have given me only a part of yourself, and even then yourself in the theatre, on the platform, doing your damndest in public.

I will admit at once that we novelists of to-day are trying for something rarer and more difficult to catch than Trollope did. He did not even know that such things were to be caught. I will admit also that the creator should not disturb himself as to whether others find his creation real or no. He will never be satisfied. If only the stupid and imperceptive found him unreal how agreeable it would be!—or if on the other hand it were the unperceptive alone who find him real he could at least say: "I have my public. They may not be of the finest taste but they are in the end the most faithful and affectionate."

But the novelist will always be bewildered by his readers. A young man from Oxford—obviously of the finest intelligence—calls you magnanimous but cannot do with your unreality. A critic, wise, ironic, blasé, most surprisingly blesses you for that very romantic quality! A creator works first for himself—he gives his notion of the universe through the shape and colour of his personality. He can, poor devil, do none other. Afterwards his work collects round it the citizens of the same world as himself. Be they deaf and blind,

halt and maim, it is no matter. He must not be disturbed. He can do only what he can.

Trollope's reality is altogether a slighter, smaller thing than Balzac's, Turgenev's, Tolstoi's—but he is never false to himself. If I see life like one of those toy-theatres beloved to me in my youth, well, it is the world of the toy-theatre that I create. Even that little stage of coloured paper and dancing marionettes has its virtues.

So I am not criticising you because I find your world unreal. I am only asking you that, your world being what it is, you should fill it as full as you can. Trollope did that. He knew nothing of the rocks of Assouan, but he *did* know of the terrors of the Quiverful family when they thought that the hospital would, after all, slip their grasp; of Mr. Slope's lust for the Signora; of Mr. Harding's delicate conscience.

And here for a moment, at the very last, I will tread on most dangerous ground. Trollope's men and women are engaged in a battle, a battle that seems at any rate to themselves of the first importance. Your characters are concerned in no sort of conflict. Conflicts are, I am well aware, old-fashioned. The hero has been banished from the novel and, you are well assured, will never return. I am not so certain. I believe that there is a moral world and that the novelists of your generation are losing a great deal by disregarding it.

Behold, dear Richard, how entirely I have given myself away; a thing that you are pledged never, never to do. Nevertheless—when you are forty-eight...!

I am,  
Your affectionate friend,  
HUGH WALPOLE.

[The end of *A Letter to a Modern Novelist* by Hugh  
Walpole]