

The Craft of Fiction:
A Critical Review

by

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to critically assess Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction*. Investigating the critical insights of this artifact, the review sheds light on the underlying bodies of thought as crystallized in *The Craft*, and negotiates fresh grounds of exploration. The pedagogical weight of the book is also within the compass of the present endeavour. The review touches exclusively on *The Craft* in terms of its thematic structures and stylistic strategies.

Introduction

The Craft of Fiction is a major contribution by Percy Lubbock (1879 - 1965). Lubbock is an English man of letters, known as an essayist, critic and biographer. He is a good friend of Henry James, and becomes James's follower in literary terms, and his editor after his death. Anonymously in the columns of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Lubbock reviews significant modern novels including Forster's *Howard's End*. His contributions include *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters* (1906), *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (1907), *Samuel Pepys* (1909), *Earlham* (1921), *Roman Pictures* (1923), *The Region Cloud* (1925), *Portrait Of Edith Wharton* (1947), and others.

In *The Craft of Fiction*, Lubbock addresses a number of critical issues vis-à-vis the craftsmanship of the modern novel, which he defines as the one that requires us to “turn the flat impressions of our senses into solid shapes” (9). Subsumed here are other critical questions like the inseparability of form and content, actuality vs. fictionality, the inexhaustible potential of the artifact, the point of view, and the various forms of narrative.

Central to *The Craft of Fiction* is the assumption of the reader as an active agent in the construction of the novel. Lubbock's concern with the figure of the reader in terms of the meaning-making process is of paramount significance; the reader constitutes a *leitmotif* in *The Craft*. “The hours of the author's labour,” says Lubbock, “are lived again by the reader, the pleasure of creation is renewed” (24). Prior to the arrival of the Reader-Response criticism, Lubbock anticipates and captures the signals of the dawn of the reader's era on the scene of critical operations, and, therefore, he is remarkably a pioneer in this critical project. On various occasions and almost throughout the book, Lubbock is clearly seen to address the reader, to show him his role and position, and to discourse on the critical arms with which the reader needs to get equipped.

The reader must know how to handle the stuff which is continually forming in his mind while he reads; he must be able to recognize its fine variations and to take them all into account...and a reader who tries to get possession of a book with nothing but his appreciation of the life and the ideas and the story in it is like a man who builds a wall without knowing the capacities of wood and clay and stone. (20)

Lubbock's interest in projecting the reader as an active participant is intertwined with his attempt to shed light on the importance of form as an indispensable constitute of the artifice of novel; "if the form is to the eye imperfect, it means that the subject is somehow and somewhere imperfectly expressed" (24).

As the title may suggest, *The Craft of Fiction* is perhaps designed to critically delineate the different issues of the art of novel-making. *The Craft* is a formalistic study of the techniques and strategies employed by a number of fiction writers in the construction of their novels. Lubbock defines the word 'craft' as "the thing that has been made and the manner of its making," and "the whole of the matter contained within the finished form of the thing" (v). The foundational claim of this book is: "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" (3). Traditional criticism, as Lubbock explains, is mainly designed to evaluate the author's genius and the art of characterization, to the exclusion of the form of the book (6). This type of critical approaches, according to him, focuses on scenes and figures, which "are not the book which the author offers us" (3). Such reading strategy is "only directed at certain fragments of the book, which the author wrote, the rest of it having ceased to exist for us" (ibid). For Lubbock, the question of form is an essential component in the process of examining the artifact. Such an examination, as he holds, should "construct an image of the book, page by page, while the form is gradually exposed to us" (6).

Lubbock advances his theory of the semiotics of form: "The best form is that which makes the most of its subject" (40). The relationship that exists between the form and the content of a novel is profoundly organic; it is a one-to-one sort of correlation. This entails the fact that formalistic aspects should exist in complete harmony with their thematic counterparts-- "whenever hand and thought, working together, claim for the fruit of their partnership, [therein lies] the value of an aesthetic satisfaction" (viii).

Overall View

The Craft of Fiction runs to 274 pages, divided into eighteen parts. Having no section titles, these parts are thematically connected as they function as a continuous illustration of the main ideas put forth in the first part of the book. Each part is designed either to discourse on a certain technique, point of view, some formalistic element, or to constitute the site of the critical examination itself. The book takes the form of lectures that are delivered in an explanatory tone; it is essentially pedagogical in orientation. Lubbock demonstrates his ideas in lucid, simple idioms of expression that are free of technical jargon. He attempts to strike a larger voice, precisely owing to the fact that the book is represented as a facilitating guide so as to address not only the expertise but also everyone eager to learn more of how to

approach a work of art, especially the novel, in a more systematic, directed and critical manner.

It is interesting to observe that *The Craft of Fiction* is informed by Lubbock's own insights. It is written as a self-critical exercise, based on personal observations and conclusions; it is projected as a crystallization of a personal experience and investigation on the part of its author. Hence, the book does not include any review of the earlier literature in the field, nor is there any reference to any critic or critical studies.

Part II of *The Craft* mainly addresses the issue of the reader as an active participant in the meaning-making process. Lubbock considers the reader of the novel a "novelist"; the reader is not a passive consumer of an already-packaged commodity, but is rather an agent in the construction of the book (17). As a co-producer in the making of the artifact, the reader needs to arm himself with the necessary tools which can enable him to recognize the variations of the artifact and to take all of them into account. The reader also needs to get acquainted with the "various forms of narrative, the forms in which a story is told" (20), like the dramatic, the pictorial, the scenic, and the generalized. Lubbock also recommends that the reader adopt a trans-subjective position, an observer's angle of vision from which he "must hold it away from us, see it all in detachment and use the whole of it to make the image of the book itself" (ibid). Having a bird's-eye-view and being well-equipped with the critical notions, the reader has to approach the work of art with a clear mind, free of intellectual prejudices and ideological commitment (ibid). It is only then that he or she can truly appreciate the value of art and can experience the thrill of literature.

Parts III and IV are devoted to elaborating on Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Lubbock contends that Tolstoy creates a novel of ample scope, covering wide spaces and many years, long, populous and eventful. The novelist provides a "panoramic vision of people and places, a huge expanse in which armies are marshaled" (27). Despite the ample scope, Tolstoy, as Lubbock remarks, "touches the detail of the scene, the single episode, the fine shade of character, with exquisite lightness and precision" (27). Lubbock further observes that *War and Peace* crystallizes life as the "same always and everywhere;" since "there is nothing new under the sun" (30). The characters are the children of yesterday, today, and tomorrow and there is nothing in them that is not of all time. The war and the peace are merely episodic; the historic occasion or scene is used as a foil and a background to the entire structure of the novel. Here it is worth noting that Lubbock is of the view that the juxtaposition of the issue of war and peace, and the question of the cycle of life does not seem to produce any result (33). The only thing one can think of in such a case is that "only from time to time, upon no apparent principle, and without a word of warning, one of them is dropped, and the other resume" (ibid).

Lubbock makes the point that it is exclusively owing to the ample scope, the length of time span, and the juxtaposition of the seemingly disconnected stories of *War and Peace* that the novel appears to suffer, and is thus deprived of its due weight. The reason for such a case, as Lubbock points out, stems from the fact that the general shape of the novel fails to satisfy the eye: "it is a confusion of two designs, a confusion more or less masked by Tolstoy's imperturbable ease of manner, but revealed by the look of his novel when it is seen as a whole" (39). Lubbock diagnoses the problem of the form and ascribes it to the importation of the two stories of war and peace and youth and age, and to the fact that neither of them is finished nor given its full development (41). Tolstoy's novel, in Lubbock's words, "is wasteful of its subject; that is the whole objection to its loose, unstructural form" (ibid). "The well-made book," in Lubbock's perspective, "is the book in which the subject and the form coincide and are indistinguishable- the book in which the matter is used up in the form in which the form expresses the matter" (40).

In parts V and VI, Lubbock attends to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Despite designating it as a "novel in which the subject stands firm and clear, without the least shade of ambiguity" (60), Lubbock remarks that there is plenty of diversity of method in this novel. The methods of art, according to him, are thrown into clear relief. The story stands obediently before the author, with all its developments, "the characters defined, the small incidents disposed in order" (62). The central point round which Lubbock's argument revolves is the point of view of the narrator in the context of *Madame Bovary*. In this novel, "Flaubert himself has retreated, and it is Emma with whom we immediately deal" (68). It is through the eyes of Emma that the reader is introduced to the story and its incidents. However, there is a shift in this point of view especially when the focus is laid on Emma herself. The narratorial voice becomes that of the author as to shed light on Emma and how others view and assess her conduct (75). So "while one aspect of the matter can be seen from within, through the eyes of the woman, another must inevitably be seen from without, through nobody's eyes but the author's own" (85). Lubbock observes that the transition is remarkably made "without awkwardness, without calling attention to it" (87).

In his analysis of the narrative form of *Madame Bovary*, Lubbock alludes to Flaubert's "impersonality." Through this device, the novelist is able to express his feelings, dramatize them, and embody them in a living form, instead of stating them directly. By virtue of impersonality, Flaubert, according to Lubbock, is able to handle his method skillfully. Moreover, Lubbock remarks that this novel is pictorially composed; "its object is to make Emma's existence as intelligible and visible as may be. We, who read the book, are to share her sense of life, till no uncertainty is left in it" (84).

In part VII, Lubbock dwells upon Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* as a novel which provides a cross-section view of a certain spatio-temporal reality.

“Panoramic” in method, the novel provides a vivid portrayal of a certain social set up (98). Instead of the scenic method, Thackeray employs the pictorial one which enables him to bring about “that foreshortening and generalizing, that fusion of detail, that subordination of the instance and the occasion to the broad effect” (100).

Part VIII is a continuation of Lubbock’s discussion of Thackeray. Here the discussion is conducted around how the presence of an author like Thackeray as an “omniscient narrator” is necessitated by the very nature of the novel itself. Panoramic in scope, *Vanity Fair* requires the help of its creator in order to be accessible to the reader. Lubbock affirms that “we need him all the time and can never forget him. He it is who must assemble and arrange his large chronicle, piecing it together out of his experience” (114). As a reflective story-teller, the author explains, illustrates and imparts the fruit of his observations to the reader. In this context, Lubbock cites Turgenev as yet another illustrative example of how it is sometimes necessary to have the voice of the author as a guide, which demystifies and paves the way for the reader’s comprehension. However, Lubbock, though approves of the narratorial voice of the author, stresses the need to dramatize the point of view. Everything should be raised to a power approaching that of drama, “where the intervention of the story-teller is no longer felt” (122).

The author must supply his view, but he might treat his view as though it were in its turn a piece of action. It is a piece of action, or of activity, when he calls up these old recollections; and why should not that effort be given the value of a sort of drama on its own account? It would then be like a play within a play; the outer framework at least--consisting of the reflective mind-- would be immediately in front of the reader; and its relation to the thing framed, the projected vision, would explain itself. So long as the recorder stands outside and away from his book, as Thackeray stands outside *Vanity Fair*. (127)

Besides, Lubbock contends that the use of the first person narrator is dramatically effective. He illustrates his point by referring to *David Copperfield*. It is a case for narration in person, in character whereby “everything was gained and nothing lost,” because, as the argument runs, what concerns the reader is to see what David sees. The inner workings of David’s mind are of little significance to the reader. “It is the story of what happened around him, not within” (129). Moreover, in discussing the use of the first person narrator, Lubbock refers to Meredith’s *Harry Richmond*. In Lubbock’s words, “the story has a romantic and heroic temper, the kind of chivalrous fling that sits well on a youth of spirit, telling his own tale” (130). Lubbock accounts for the use of the first person narrator as a “source of relief,” on account of the fact that “it composes of its own accord,” and “the hero gives the story an indefeasible unity by the mere act of telling it” (131).

In parts X and XI, Lubbock continues to demonstrate the point in which the “author is eliminated” and the story is highly dramatized. It is a case in which the story speaks for itself, without the intervention of its creator. Lubbock lays stress on this method, especially with reference to the pictorial novels in which the author’s description and elucidation are needed. To this end, he draws on Henry James’s *The Ambassadors* in which Strether stands as a living demonstration of the personal narration within a highly dramatic fiction. In this novel, Strether, explains Lubbock, describes everything around him, including his own state of affair. The man’s mind becomes visible, phenomenal, dramatic; but in acting its part it still lends us eyes, is still an opportunity of extended vision. “The author does not tell the story of Strether’s mind; he makes it tell itself, he dramatizes it” (147). And so the novelist approaches drama, gets behind the narrator, and represents the mind of the narrator as in itself a kind of action. By doing so, contends Lubbock, the novelist forfeits none of his special freedom, that is, the picture-making faculty that he enjoys as a story-teller (148). Lubbock concludes by affirming that *The Ambassadors* is a story seen from one man’s point of view, and yet it is a story in which that point of view is itself a matter for the reader to confront and to watch constructively. Everything in the novel is dramatically rendered because even in the page of description, nobody is addressing us, nobody is reporting his impression to the reader (170).

Part XII sheds further light on the effect of dramatizing the novel and how it is of significance to heighten its flat, pictorial, descriptive surface by the arts of drama. As in the case of Strether, maintains Lubbock, dramatic rendering of the novel animates the actual elements of the picture, the description, and enables the character’s mind to emerge from the book with force and authority for its presence is deeply felt. In this context, Lubbock takes up *The Wings of the Dove* as an illustration of his point. In this novel, the subject is entirely undramatic; it is all a condition and a situation to be portrayed, not an action. Despite this undramatic subject, its treatment renders it highly dramatic. Milly’s consciousness is to the fore, the deep agitation within her is the concern of the moment according to Lubbock (175). Skirting round and round them, giving one brief sight of her in eloquent circumstances, then displaying the all but untroubled surface of her thought on this side and that, the author encompasses the struggle that proceeds within her, and lifts it bodily into the understanding of the reader (ibid). The author, in other words, captures glimpses of the action, the inner workings of her consciousness at different moments. The result is that “solidity, weight, a third dimension, is given to the impression of Milly’s unhappy case” (178). This has also a further profit for the impartial onlooker who can see round the object, to left and right, as far as possible “just as with two eyes, stereoscopically, we shape and solidify the flat impression of a sphere” (ibid). Moreover, in order to further heighten the dramatic spell of the novel, Lubbock states, it is observable that in *The Wings of the Dove* narration is

distributed among the author and the characters. The crux of the narration, may it be noted, does not consist in their spoken words, but rather in their own actions (184).

Part XIII is a continuation of Lubbock's discourse upon the significance of dramatizing fiction. He takes up Henry James's *The Awkward Age* as an illustrative instance of purely dramatic subject. This novel, according to Lubbock, is characterized by immediacy of perception and dramatic situations; everything is immediate and particular. There is no probing or penetrating into anybody's thought, no survey of scene from a height, no resumption of the past in retrospect. "The whole book," according to Lubbock, "passes scenically before the reader, and nothing is offered by the look and the speech of the characters on a series of chosen occasions" (189). The subject of the book resides in the characters' behavior, since "there are no gradual processes of change and development to be watched in their minds. It is their action that is significant" (192). The example of *The Awkward Age* provides a remarkable instance of how the voice of the spokesman, whether it be that of the author or his creature, is silenced, and the artifact speaks for itself.

Parts XIV and XV are devoted to a discussion of Balzac's craft of fiction. Lubbock contends that it is a peculiar feature of Balzac's art to compress so much experience into two or three hundred pages. Balzac's care in creating the scene, according to Lubbock, is economical; it is not merely a manner of setting the stage for the drama, it is a provision of character and energy for the drama when it begins (207). Moreover, Lubbock makes reference to Balzac's technique of making book after book overlap, encroach and entangle itself with the rest, by the device of setting the hero of one story to figure more or less obscurely in a dozen other. Lubbock comments that such a technique lends Balzac's art of fiction an air of truth and authenticity (208). To this end, Lubbock also comment on Balzac's minute knowledge of the things and objects that surround the character. Balzac, according to Lubbock, cannot think of his people without the homes they inhabit; with Balzac to imagine a human being is to imagine a province, a city, a corner of the city, a building at a turn of the street, certain furnished rooms, and finally the man or woman who lives in them (221). It is a completely deductive approach which commences with the universal and narrows down to the particular, from the pictorial to the dramatic.

In his discussion of the need to dramatize fiction, Lubbock underlines the point that such a dramatization need to be qualified, restrained and toned down. He takes up Dickens's *Bleak House* as a typical case in point. He shows how Dickens's way of dealing with his romantic intrigues is to lead gradually to them, through well-populated scenes of character and humour, so that his world is actual, and its air is familiar. Though the actual presentation is dramatic, because of the scenically formed actions, "Dickens's books are in

fact examples of the pictured scene that opens and spreads very gradually, in order to make a valid world for drama” (217).

In part XVI, Lubbock touches on Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* as an illustration of how the method of the book does not arise out of its own thematic vision. The whole of this novel, according to Lubbock, is scenic; it is a chain of particular occasions, acted out, talked out, by the crowd of the people concerned. The plan of the novel is strictly dramatic, with no space provided for any kind of pictorial introduction. Unlike Balzac’s freedom of exposition and retrospect, Tolstoy, observes Lubbock, never draws back from the immediate scene, to picture the manner of life that his people lead, or to give a foreshortened impression of their history. Lubbock remarks that the nature of the story is not dramatic at all, but a pictorial contrast. It is a picture outspread, an impression of life, rather than an action. All this adds negatively to the weight of the novel. He writes:

There is no adequate preparation; Anna is made to act as a deeply stirred and agitated woman before she has the value for such emotions. She has not yet become a presence familiar enough, and there is no means of gauging the force of the storm that is seen to shake her. It is a flaw in the book which has often been noticed, and it is a flaw which Tolstoy could hardly have avoided, if he was determined to hold to his scenic plan. (244)

In part XVII, Lubbock explicitly states his view that the whole question of method in the craft of fiction is governed by the question of the point of view--the question of the relation in which a narrator stands to the story (251). He contends that if the story-teller is in the story himself, the author is dramatized; his assertions gain in weight, for they are supported by the presence of the narrator in the pictured scene. It is advantage scored; the author shifts his responsibility, and it now falls where the reader can see and measure it. Nothing is imported into the story from without; it is self-contained, it has no associations

with anyone beyond its circle. That is the case in which the narrator merely records or relates what he or she observes or hears. However, if the question of his own consciousness arises, therein crops up the need for another point of view to participate in the knowledge-making process. That point of view may be that of the author or somebody else in the story.

Furthermore, in this part, Lubbock reiterates his stance with respect to the point of view. According to him, in a dramatically rendered novel, the point of view is that of the reader. The characters’ thoughts and motives are transmuted into action. “A subject wrought to this pitch of objectivity,” maintains Lubbock, “is no doubt given weight and compactness and authority in the highest degree” (254). However, in a pictorial book, Lubbock claims, there exists no possibility for the reader’s point of view; another point of view is required. Narration here may be conducted by somebody in the story; the

picture becomes richer and fuller, because it is the author's as well as his creature's, both at once. "Nobody notices, but in fact there are two brains behind the seeing eye; no one of them is the author's, who adopts and shares the position of his creature, and at the same time supplements his wit" (ibid). Moreover, there is the last kind of the point of view. In this case, contends Lubbock, the author entertains the reader, "the minstrel draws his audience round him, the listeners rely upon his word" (263). This traditional way of telling the story is authorially dominated.

Part XVIII winds up *The Craft of Fiction*. Here is a recapitulation of the dramatic and the pictorial methods of the artifice of fiction. Lubbock sums up his concept of the dramatic scene as the one of paramount significance, the one which contains no foreshortening of time and space; it is rather a scene that is laid before the reader to mentally reconstruct it in his or her own imagination (269). In the pictorial mode, the general survey, with its command of time and space, the focus is on the description and elucidation provided by the narrator. Lubbock describes the pictorial as "subordinate, supplement, and preparatory" (ibid). Ultimately, he concludes his book with the striking critical pronouncement: "The author of the book was a craftsman, the critic must overtake him at his work and see how the book was made" (274).

Concluding Remarks

Based on the current review of *The Craft of Fiction*, it seems necessary to make some observations. The views listed below are the reviewers'.

- *The Craft of Fiction* is lengthy in size; it consists of eighteen parts. The book could however have been written in a shorter and more condensed style.
- Despite the fact that the book is written in a part-wise manner, these parts could not be fully grasped if they are read in isolation. They constitute a one-stretch line of thought.
- Although *The Craft* addresses a considerably crucial issues like form, there is hardly any sign of employing a technical language, and the diction used here is of everyday spoken idioms. As a mark of virtue of the book, it is composed in a style that is entirely unshackled by convoluted technicality and intricate complexity. This style is pedagogically meritorious.
- *The Craft of Fiction* does not contain any literature review in the field; it seems to be the product of the author's personal reflection and private conclusions.
- The issue of form is restricted to the question of point of view, to the exclusion of other significant, semiotic and stylistic factors like repetition, fragmentation, syntax, vocabulary, and so on.
- The perspective recommended to be adopted by the reader is that of the observer, a trans-subjective angle of vision. Such a top-down approach, however, denies the reader a great deal of the joy of exploring the subtleties

of style and the intricate nature of fiction making. Based on the present review, it has to be stated that the perspective that the reader ought to adopt is that of the player, an interactive one. By virtue of such an approach, the reader would be in a position to establish fresh channels of dialogue with the ‘other’, the reader would be able to have a lived as well as a felt experience. Moreover, the intersubjective approach has a further advantage of crystallizing the process of cross-fertilization, whereby the schematic knowledge of the reader encounters that of the author within the textual site of the work of art. It is such moments of epistemic interface that call for further investigation and stimulate fresh avenues of research.

- Lubbock appears to view the novel, and by implication other art forms, as an autonomous entity that is divorced from both the context of production as well as that of reception. In such a modality of theorization, art is conceived and conceptualized as a technique, wherein the task of the reader does not exceed the limits of examining the literariness of the literary and the artfulness of art. As a consequence, there is no attempt implied here to represent literature as a site for discussing wider cultural politics or poetics. *The Craft of Fiction* is, thus, an endeavour to decontextualise literature, to treat it as an independent discourse delinked from dynamic contact with other forms of culture.

Despite limitations pointed out above, it is of paramount significance to state that all throughout *The Craft* there is a striking voice of an educator, a teacher that reaches far beyond the specialists in the field to one and all, to everyone eager to assimilate some level of grasp of some fundamental principles of the very craft of fiction-writing and appreciation. Jargon-free, and pedagogically oriented, this book proves fruitful, especially to the students of literature. It can provide them with a number of the essentials to gain access to the world of the novel. *The Craft* supplies important perspectives that can equip the learners with the critical arms to interact with art in a more critically-grounded style of examination.

In its ultimate analysis, the reviewers of Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* find it relevant to recommend the inclusion of this book to the B. A. level curriculum (especially the first two years of the four-year programme) on grounds of its critically useful insights to the development of the students' literary competence as well as its pedagogically stimulating manner of presentation. The merits of this book far surpass its limited demerits, and its thematic content can enrich the experience of literature and deepen the very art of critical analysis to which students are most in need.

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