

## Speech at the Principal Theater

May 20<sup>th</sup> 1921

### **The art of making novels.**

Valencianas, Valencians:

It is a little odd that Blasco Ibáñez should come here to talk about Blasco Ibáñez the novelist.

It would have been irrelevant to ask a man who was not a novelist to talk about a novelist, because no one who is not a novelist can properly discuss technique, what the novelist said, what he meant, what people suppose he said.

I am going to speak to you about the novel in general before I speak to you about my own novels.

The novel is the legitimate child of modern literature; it is the great conquest of modern times.

Its success is not as quick, not as sudden as the success of the theatre, but it is more lasting.

In the theatre, in the course of a few hours, a complete stranger acquires the greatest popularity.

The work of the novel is more solid.

All great theatrical works, a few years after their success, seem to have gone into a big, black tunnel, disappearing from people's memory.

Only a few manage to emerge from the other end of the tunnel, and then they are consecrated.

You know of novels which, in spite of being more than a hundred years old, still give you the most refined and ineffable sensations of beauty.

In the present age, and by that I mean from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the genre of novels has been produced, and when future generations ask these centuries: "What have you given to the history of beauty; did you not give the poetry that made its stanzas vibrate in the shadow of the Parthenon and the olive trees of Athens? Did you not produce the theatre, the stage fiction which Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides placed in such a high place, did you not give anything to literature, to art, you may answer: "Yes, we have given to the treasury of literature, of art, sensations of beauty from something that was unknown, we have given music and the novel, the two greatest conquests of modern thought".

Music has existed in all times, especially religious music.

However, it could rather be said that music existed, but not music itself.

Before the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was only a religious manifestation that took place inside temples.

With the first wanderings of the German symphonists, with Beethoven and then Wagner, music appeared and developed.

In the same way, the novel existed in antiquity, although in its aspirations it did not embody the way of being of the people.

In contemporary times, the novel acquired a life of its own: the movement and action that are characteristic of it.

It is easy to explain the predilection for the theatre in those distant times: to go to the theatre, you don't need to know how to read!

Those noblemen of cloak and dagger went to applaud Shakespeare and Lope de Vega, gentlemen, because, either they did not know how to read, or they were not used to it.

In the Middle Ages there was a glimpse of the novel in the tales of Boccaccio and the great splendid rising of the sun with the *Don Quixote* of the illustrious Miguel Cervantes Saavedra, the most precious flower of Spanish literature.

Two centuries go by, and when the people applaud the democratic school, when the French Revolution conquers the rights and liberties of man, when the people begin to know how to read, is when the splendour of the novel begins.

People were looking for a means to dream, to rise above the vulgarity of life.

Anatole France says that the novel is the opium of the Westerners.

You all know that the Eastern peoples, when they need to get away from this life, when they want to elevate their spirit to the delightful regions of reverie, turn to the opium pipe.

Our opium is the novel.

Thanks to it we can dream and live in a better world. Hence the popularity of the novel.

There is no propagandist who does not resort to it to move people and infiltrate them with his ideals.

Rousseau, in the *New Eloise*, expounds his philosophical ideas.

Chateaubriand did the same with his reactionary ideas after the Revolution and the Empire, and so did Lamartine, Victor Hugo and many others.

The novel, in the genre that corresponds to our time, is a literary manifestation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and it will be a long time before another genre emerges that modifies or cancels it out.

In poetry we see the march of the genre in the history of all peoples in a way that is always the same, which is almost a law; epic poetry is followed by love poetry, and then

by tragedy. When more advanced epochs are reached, when greater literary perfection is attained, the novel develops, which is the whole, the flowering of all the previous artistic manifestations.

The novel, being essentially an art of evocation, is the most difficult to realise.

In Spain and in other countries, there is a great fundamental error with reference to the novelist.

They confuse the novelist with the writer.

I tell you that one can be a great, an immense writer and not be a novelist; and on the contrary, one can write amazing novels and not know how to write.

To be a novelist one must possess a special instinct of observation, a sense of evocation which may be lacking in the best of writers, in the one who handles language most correctly, which will always be dry, cold, but it is a quality that is essentially characteristic of and indispensable for the novelist.

I have some ideas about the novel, which I am going to expound here, which are very rare.

I put them forward in Paris and they made many critics think.

I divide novels into three genres: good novels, bad novels and novels that are not even bad.

A good novel is easy to distinguish. For a novel to be bad, it needs some originality, a mistake that outrages the reader.

The terrible thing is that it is not even bad, that the reader, after going through three hundred pages, at the end, closes the book and exclaims: "Well, I didn't get anything out of it".

The novel is essentially an art of evocation, and we novelists, we readers, are always fooling you.

We are like conjurers of reality and we seduce you with our completely false art.

You read a novel, a description, and you think: "How well written it is", I can see it! And you don't think that it is not reality, it is only the evocation of reality that is made for you.

You could say: "How well painted reality is", if we were photographers with our pen; but no, we are painters with very few brushstrokes.

To make an inventory of a person from head to toe is within the reach of anyone.

This is where being born a novelist comes in.

If you have six people together, who dress alike, whose physical characteristics are almost identical, the description of each of them, however minute it might be, could never give the reader an exact idea that would enable him to recognise them in the course of the work.

The novelist finds six people together and instantly sees the detail, the unique, the distinguishing feature, and with six single strokes of the brush, he describes and the six types remain eternally standing.

You can see that this is a bit difficult, that there is no university where this is taught.

I have only seen in the “University Columbi” (where there are courses for everything known, one for teaching how to make novels, which even had a professor), an old professor who explained one day how Mr. Ibáñez made novels.

And there were many ladies and young ladies and not a few young people in attendance.

I attended a lesson and after listening to it, I told them frankly that it was useless.

If I had known how I made my novels myself, I would have made them all very good!

I examine myself and I see that I no longer have the spontaneity and freshness in my writing that I had in my youth.

I know my craft much better than I did then.

I am like the musician who has lost his inspiration, but who now has the most perfect execution.

If I had to write those first works now, I would undoubtedly do it better; what I don't know is whether I would have the grace and emotional force I had then.

That was the work of youth, things of the moment.

In your case, I would be more concerned now with the problems of modern literature.

Our life is nothing more than the swing of a pendulum, the cradle in which we were laid as children, which swings from side to side and which endures even in the most vulgar manifestations of life.

In literature as in everything else, the eternal swaying dominates.

In the early days of the novel, a certain harmony was sought, a literary part to which the work was subordinated for the most part.

Balzac, Dickens, and even Victor Hugo himself, when they wrote novels, balanced interest and observation, giving, if possible, greater importance in their works to the literary part.

After them, this was broken and interest began to dominate the works.

Those cloak-and-dagger novels which had made Alexandre Dumas (senior) so glorious a reputation began to appear.

Interest was exaggerated and forced to seek out crazy adventures, and as a necessary reaction the naturalist school arose, of which Gustave Flaubert was the first apostle, followed by Goncourt, Daudet, Zola and others.

In these novels the disciples of these came to imitate the bad things, exaggerating naturalism, going so far as to determine that to be a good novel it should have no action, and to suppress it every time it acquired a certain vivacity and interest they placed a description as if to say to the reader: the naturalist novel is very serious, you have come to think.

There was a novelist of this school, a venerable veteran of letters, who will be 80 years old today, whose name I will not tell you, who made a real tour de force in the novel that hates interest.

He described a bourgeois couple going for a walk with their children; they see the street, passing trams, dogs, cars, people (and the novelist spends twenty chapters on this). They sit in a café; they watch the patrons (twenty more chapters). It is eight o'clock in the evening, you go home, and with that comes the end of the novel.

The standards of the naturalist novel were met; it did not fall into the vulgarity of the novella, which was all about interest.

Fifty years later, we in Spain learned and agreed that the novel must be interesting.

You can combine psychology with the action of life.

It's a bit like those clocks that have two panes of glass: on one side you see the hours, on the other, the machine.

The novel must present the inner meaning of life and, on the other hand, the material acts that animate it.

There was a French magazine that asked what the novel would be like after the war. I was one of those who answered, because I understand that the novel never responds to the state of a person's soul.

In life, we are always after that something we would like to be but are not.

At the time of the French Revolution, people went to the Place de la Greve to watch the guillotining and even got excited by the bloodshed, and it seemed logical that they should love tragic literature. But no, they went to read the pastoral novels of the knight Florian.

During the period of Louis Philippe, the good bourgeoisie who belonged to the national militia, who could not sleep without putting on a red cotton cap and who let their wife's bourgeoisie run all their business, read the gruesome adventures of *The Three Musketeers*.

It always turns out, then, that we like what is not our life, but quite the opposite.

That is why I replied to that French magazine that when peace came, literature would be the opposite of the eventful existence of the time; and, in fact, publishers today accept all kinds of novels as long as they do not speak of war.

After Blasco the lecturer, let Blasco the novelist speak to you.

Make the abstraction that I am me. And in this way I will be able to begin like a professor analysing my work.

Blasco's work consists of four large groups of novels: Valencian, Spanish, American and war novels.

You all know the Valencian ones. The Spanish ones were the product of my travels, and don't be surprised if I forget some of them when I mention them, because woe betide the novelist who cannot forget: he is writing the same one all his life!

The novelist must be like a kind of sponge that collects all the water of reality when immersed in it and when squeezed out produces the novel, remaining dry again for a new immersion.

To the third group, the American novels, belongs *The Argonauts*, which I thought was something like the prologue to a three-part story similar to *The Gold of the Rhine* in *The Ring of the Nibelungs* trilogy.

The war interrupted the realisation of my wishes.

*The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, the war on land, belongs to the group of war novels. *Mare Nostrum*, the submarine war. *The Enemies of Women*, the life of happy people on the fringes of war.

You don't know in what distressing situation I wrote the novels of my youth. Now I have no objection to say so.

You do not know the misery in which I have lived; you do not know that there were many days when I lacked the money necessary to buy in the market the elements necessary for my maintenance, and you see, gentlemen, that, at that time, it was said of me that I was the master of Valencia.

On your beach, after fifteen years of separation, one day I met a gentleman whom the fishermen called "the portrait painter". It was Joaquín Sorolla, who at that time was painting his first pictures, those of the bulls and the boats which later went to London and the Luxembourg Museum and which were the foundation of his glorious fame.

Here, at this moment, the image of Sorolla has crossed my mind and I must pay my tribute of friendship and admiration to the great illustrious Valencian, a tribute which may be the last I can pay him in this world.

Here you see how false and contemptible the progress of the artist is. When he sees himself consecrated, immortal, the physical part arises that snatches the person and puts an end to one of the greatest artistic glories in the world in a few moments,

I am going to write three great novels, evocations of Valencian history.

A novel of the present time, another one about the anti pope Pedro de Luna in which I will try to vindicate the Borgias who are slandered for being Spanish and Valencian, and another one about the discovery of America, which was made with money from the city of Valencia and it is necessary that the American nations know it, but I am not going to speak to you more about it because it would lose all novelty.

And I am going to finish...

Think that a week of homage is a lot of homage.

I can tell you that I consider it my duty to continue the work I have begun.

I am not sorry for my past; I have not knowingly wronged anyone; I recognise that I have lived a large part of my life in error, and bear in mind that sometimes frankness is a fault.

I have been a member of parliament, a politician, an agitator. In Spain, many can be this. Fewer novelists can be novelists.

As a Spaniard and as a Valencian, I believe it is my duty to persist in this as a high and patriotic goal.

We are one of the least known and most slandered nations in Europe.

A long account of revenge weighs upon us.

Surely it is not the politicians and the rulers who will come to the vindication of our homeland, because they only speak for those at home.

You do not know the French Minister of the Interior or the Minister of Labour, but you will surely have in your memory many names of French poets, novelists, philosophers and artists.

It is we artists who have the duty to go to foreign countries to proclaim loudly that we are not a second-rate country; that we work, that we contribute as the first to the common work of humanity with our intelligence and our efforts.

On the day when I consider that I have contributed my grain of sand to the vindication of the name of our homeland, I will be satisfied with my literary work, not for what it is in itself, but for the service it has rendered to Spain and to Valencia.