

THE ENGLISH NOVEL SINCE 1900

BURNS MARTIN

THE novel is not only the most popular, but also the youngest of our literary forms. Born in 1740, it seems to have been unexpected. The midwife was only a printer, one Samuel Richardson, intent on giving wholesome advice about morals and letter-writing. Probably because Aristotle had neglected to provide rules for hero, plot, and diction, the novel was viewed for almost a century with suspicion, and was hardly deemed respectable. But, like many another child of the hedges, it thrived; and because, like Topsy, it just grew up, it mingled impudently with the world, acquiring thereby free and easy manners. It became Protean in matter: it responded to every fad and fancy, to every hope and disappointment of man. It became Protean in form: when people undertook, like Henry James, to train it, it merely laughed and proceeded to break the new rules. It learned only one restriction: it must interest the reader. With the passage of time, the novel has acquired age and respectability; now novelists and professors write books to tell us just what the novel is, or should be; just how it conducts itself, or should conduct itself. Despite these well meant attentions, the novel continues to flourish and to develop.

I

Formerly, literature had a simple task: to teach with delight. Nowadays we are averse from teaching. Keats said, "We hate poetry that has a palpable design on us", and we feel the same about the novel. If the scales are weighted against one set of characters in favour of another, if the author points his moral too obviously, we are repelled. Yet we insist that the novel come to grips with life—only we want an emotional experience, not a piece of didacticism. Mr. Wells and Galsworthy will illustrate this point. The former, beginning as a Socialist, and the latter, a sensitive gentleman aware of class differences and injustice, saw the novel as a vehicle of propaganda. But both were also artists. In their work sometimes the propagandist is uppermost; sometimes, the artist. (Nor is it always easy for the reader to decide which is uppermost, for his own sympathies and prejudices will colour his judgment). So, from Mr. Wells we have such fine works as *Mr. Polly*, *Tono-Bungay*, *Kipps*, and such an unreadable com-

pendium of modern theories as *The World of William Clissold*. Max Beerbohm was unfair when he said that Galsworthy had sold his artistic birthright for a pot of message; but *The Man of Property* and *The Dark Flower* are probably Galsworthy's best work, and in them the problem has been best subdued to the demands of art.

In their insistence that all phases of life were theirs, modern novelists discovered sex. Despite the many novels that have been written on the principle, not of art for art's sake, or even of sex for art's sake, but of sex for Freud's sake, and sex for profits' sake, the discovery has been well worth the making. But here, as with the sociological novel, the problem of what we may call the ideal distance of the author from his work arises. Take the novels of D. H. Lawrence, that strangely tortured and thwarted genius. Too often the artist was lost in the prophet, who was convinced that we had exalted the intelligence at the expense of the emotions, and that he must save us from the threatening doom. His mission grew on Lawrence; rarely after *Sons and Lovers* could a novel be for him "emotion recollected in tranquillity". And so *Sons and Lovers* remains his most satisfying work. In contrast we have Somerset Maugham. Less richly endowed than Lawrence, the artist in Mr. Maugham so dominates the material and the author's personal reactions that *Of Human Bondage* bids fair to stand as one of the literary achievements of the century.

If Socialism, the class struggle, sex, and the new psychology have left their mark on the novel, the War has also cut its swath. English war novels differ from Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Barbusse's *Under Fire* in that few are directly concerned with the trenches. Rather, the causes of the war, and the suffering and waste created by the incompetence of our ruling classes, have interested English writers. A fine example of the English war novel is C. E. Montague's *Rough Justice*; at least half the book is concerned with pre-war days. Unusual is Mr. Mottram's *Spanish Farm*, a study of a farm and a farm girl in Northern France, that symbolize the reproductive forces of Nature, always thwarted by war. Because of this symbolic and imaginative quality, *Spanish Farm* is perhaps our greatest war novel, suggesting, but not equaling, Zweig's *The Case of Sergeant Grischa*. Just as Montague emphasized the pre-war period rather than actual hostilities, so many other novelists have dwelt on the post-war period of maladjustment, disillusion, and flouting of convention. Of this group Aldous Huxley is the best known, and certainly the most reviled, probably because many people do not see, beneath the superficial filth, the stark sincerity of the man.

In the 17th century the saintly Archbishop Leighton was once reproached for not preaching, like the other divines, about contemporary politics. "Surely," he replied, "one poor brother may be permitted to preach of eternity and eternal things". The contemporary novel has fortunately had its Archbishop Leightons, who have eschewed the problems of the day for a more detached study of character and life. I am thinking of such writers as Conrad, Miss Sackville-West, Arnold Bennett, and, in most of his works, Mr. E. M. Forster. Because of their avoidance of the ephemeral and because of their artistic sincerity, these writers may be rated more highly by posterity than they are by the average reader of to-day, who too often mistakes the presentation of a problem for a work of art. From these novelists we may turn to the writers of fantasy. Here the ordinary world is brushed aside; new worlds are created with laws of their own. Here philosophers are wiser than women, as in Mr. Stephens's *Crock of Gold*; wives turn into foxes, as in David Garnett's *Lady into Fox*; and, under the influence of the sirocco, bishops come to look upon murder as a moral act, as in Norman Douglas's *South Wind*. If the reader accepts these strange things at their face value, he has much pleasure; if he can also find in them irony, parody, or satire, his pleasure is increased proportionately. It will be a sad day for the English novel when it becomes too serious for fantasy.

One kind of fiction has lost ground during the present century; the historical novel. True, historical novels are occasionally written—but who to-day awaits with eagerness "the next Waverley novel"? The reason for this loss of prestige is obvious. The dominant cultural interest of the early 19th century was history; hence, the rise and course of the historical novel. But history has given place to science, economics, and sociology, and so the historical novel has waned. Once again we see the novel as the mirror of the age.

II

So far we have been considering the subject-matter of the novel. In form the writers whom we have noted may be described as traditionalists, for they are the heirs of the 19th-century technique of the novel. They believe in a story well arranged, with a plot for clarity and intensity; they believe in action. But there is another group of writers who have been experimenting with the form and material of the novel. As representatives of this group we may take Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, and Mrs. Woolf.

In 1915, Dorothy Richardson began publishing a novel in several volumes, to be called *Pilgrimage*. About nine volumes appeared, and then came an end; nobody seems to have missed further publication. In Miss Richardson's novels we are plunged into the stream of consciousness of the heroine, Miriam Henderson, a very ordinary English girl. There is almost no action; what there is, quickly becomes reaction in Miriam's consciousness. Other people we know merely as they cross Miriam's ken, and as she reacts to them. We are not told that Miriam develops; we see her consciousness as things, events, or people float on it, and we can draw our own conclusions. One might almost say that the interest has shifted from a conscious individual to the thing or faculty that receives impressions. A quotation may help:

Sitting there in the boat, still taking an oar and determined to fling herself into the sea—she ought not to have told them she was leaving them just desperately, without anything else in prospect; because they were so good; not like employers. They would all feel for her. It was just like speaking roughly at home. Well, it was done. She glanced about. Miss Haddie across the table behind her habitual bowl of bread and milk had a face—the face of a child surprised by injustice. “I was right—I was right,” Miriam gasped to herself as the light flowed in.

Now, traditionalists have occasionally got inside their characters in this way—but the difference is that they have not stayed there volume after volume, but have come out to tell the story and to present other characters. And Miriam, a healthy normal girl, might have lived, if the publishers had not objected, to be seventy or eighty!

Of the experimentalists, James Joyce is the best known and the least read, partly because of the censor and partly because of the difficulty of his work. His first novel, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), is conventional in form, but it is notable for its unflinching realism. We know Stephen Daedalus thoroughly, so fine is the revelation of his mental and emotional states. It was *Ulysses* (1922), however, that brought Mr. Joyce fame and notoriety—for was not the book banned from all English-speaking countries? Here is a book of nearly 800 pages, devoted to one day in the lives of two Dubliners. From one point of view it marks the end of an era: it is psychological realism carried to the *n*th degree, for nothing is too sordid or too ordinary to find a place in this work. But *Ulysses* is also more than this. When a novel gets so far into the consciousness and the subconscious of its char-

acters, adopts so many new devices and, at times, a new language, and weaves into itself so many parallels to the *Odyssey* and to human anatomy and can carry so much symbolism, critical terms mean nothing if we label such a book a realistic novel. Mr. Joyce's erudition is amazing; so are his vocabulary and syntax.

He seems to feel that ordinary words carry too definite meanings to give us this stage just beyond the conscious. Therefore, by sound he hopes to suggest to the reader this hitherto unexplored realm. In this connection it may be mentioned that the author, who has a fine voice and is a musician, has made gramophone recordings of the first few pages of "Anna Livia Plurabelle". Another explanation of the vagaries of *Work in Progress* sometimes comes to the present writer: Mr. Joyce may be pulling the legs of solemn-faced critics. But such a confession merely shows how impervious the present writer is to epoch-making ideas.

Mrs. Woolf's experiments have been made in a different field. Her best known work, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), is concerned with one day in the life of the heroine. But it also gives us a good picture of Mrs. Dalloway's earlier life, and flashes of other people in London. These latter people do not know Mrs. Dalloway; indeed, never come into contact with her. A passing motor car or an aeroplane that Mrs. Dalloway and the others are watching serves as a connecting link to take us from one to the other group of Londoners. Because of this seemingly casual technique we are given an amazing sense of the complexity and relativity of life. In her latest novel, *The Waves* (1931), Mrs. Woolf has abandoned realism completely. We have soliloquies in turn by six-middle-aged people, in which they review their pasts; at the end one of them tries to sum up and find the significance of their lives. Life is, presumably, like the waves: each of us seems to be distinct, yet each of us is mysteriously part of others; in life we find ebb and flow, but no real break. *Mrs. Dalloway* is a beautiful book; so is *The Waves*, but it is also a very puzzling book. Despite the prose medium—and Mrs. Woolf is one of our great prose artists—this work should be judged not by the rules of the novel, but by the canons of great poetry.

III

It is almost impossible to compare the traditional and the experimental novel; if we attempt comparison, we must distinguish achievement and significance. Many traditional novels of the present century have achieved finality and beauty; of experimental

novels this can hardly be said except of three of Mrs. Woolf's. This is, of course, a personal opinion, but the writer feels that it would be the opinion of most readers of average intelligence and sensitiveness. But when we consider significance, our judgment is quite different. This does not mean that the writer considers the best traditionalists have been in a rut of imitation. They have retained the older pattern, yet have adapted it to their own needs. No art can live, however, without experiment. Mr. Joyce, Miss Richardson, and Mrs. Woolf are trying to widen the possibilities of the novel, to make it more responsive to changing thought and knowledge. It is very doubtful if the novel of the future will be copied exactly from the work of any one of them. Traditional patterns in literature are not discarded so easily as that. There is, however, hardly a significant traditional novel of to-day that does not show the influence of the experimental novel. And the novel of the future, we may perhaps say, will, while still following the tradition of two centuries, show even more of that influence. True, the absolute achievement of the experimentalists is small; we may well remember, however, that Shakespeare was not an innovator, but the heir of many innovators.