PORTRAIT PAINTING AND SOME RECENT NOVELS

BY FREDERIC TABER COOPER

IT seems at first thought like a rather superfluous question to ask to what extent a novelist ought to be a verbal portrait painter. The novelist is a maker of pictures in prose and of course, one would say offhand, his various characters ought to be presented to us with the clear-cut vividness of portraits so that we may know the shape and colouring of their features, the clothes they wear, the very soul of them looking out from eyes of grey or blue or brown. Stated in this way, the whole question seems axiomatic and quite beyond any need of discussion. But there is this distinction, and a rather important one, between the portrait of a person in real life and the portrait of a character in a novel; between a painting of Napoleon or George Sand or Sarah Bernhardt, on the one hand, and of Mr. Pickwick or Becky Sharp or Terence Mulvaney, on the other; namely, that the people out of real life are actual, every detail about them is a prosaic matter of fact; they could be measured a hundred times by the Bertillon system and always give the same results; whereas a character in a novel is not seen, and never can be seen, in precisely the same way by any two readers. It is probable that if all the separate impressions made upon all the separate readers of *Don Quixote*, for instance, or *Les Trois Mousquetaires* could be brought together into composite photographs, the resultant pictures would not vary very widely from the separate conceptions of the Knight of La Mancha or of Athos or Porthos or D'Artagnan. But it is really this small limit of variation, this right which we each one of us have to see a fictional character through our own eyes, that makes our friends in the book world so much more real to us than the characters in recorded history ever can be—it even explains the familiar paradox that Richard the Lion Hearted of Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Richard Yea-and-Nay of Maurice Hewlett are more real to us all than the king of historic text-books can ever be.

Now the reason why a character in fiction is seen by us more vividly when drawn by the author in a somewhat impressionistic fashion with a certain proportion of the details left out, is that we are able to associate that character with some one whom we know more or less intimately. Any of the familiar figures in public life whose faces look back at us month by month from the magazines and whose words and actions are chronicled in the daily press are, in one sense of the word, too close to us, too definite and actual, for our imaginations to become active about them; and on the other hand, because they are so clear-cut, so definitely just what they are and nothing else, we get an exaggerated sense

of their remoteness. But a character in a novel, if not given to us with too great a lavishness of detail, is very apt to call up in our minds a more or less conscious association with some one we know. For instance, take a short story in which the author has not troubled himself to do more than imply that the girl is young and attractive with brown hair and grey eyes: it is more than likely that in reading what this girl says and does you will find yourself exclaiming: "Why, that is Kate! That is Kate to the life!" But if the writer had gone a little further and with a portrait painter's accuracy had traced the oval of her cheek, the angle of nose and chin, had mentioned her two dimples and one tiny little mole behind the left ear, he would at once have spoiled for you that mental association which was the key to your visualisation —because Kate, your Kate, may not happen to have those same curves and angles, those dimples and that mole.

Now we cannot argue from this that it is better art to discard portraiture from fiction, to paint only the hearts and brains of our characters and leave their outward forms mere lay figures, convenient blanks for each reader to fill in at pleasure. In this matter, as in everything else, pertaining to fiction, the secret of success lies in compromise of an intelligent sort. Description of the colour of hair and eyes, the material and the cut of clothes is, after all, in last analysis, a question of economy of means. Thackeray wanted to be told what kind of trousers a man wore, because he found such knowledge a valuable key to character: Jane Austen was delighted when, at an exhibition of paintings, she came across a portrait which realised her own conception of one of her characters —and what pleased her about it was that the portrait verified her own private belief that that character's favourite colour was, if I remember rightly, green. Now both these novelists were instinctively upon the right track. The colour and texture of clothing, the outward adornment of ribbons and laces and jewels, are all important, so long as they give a key to character or, in any way whatever, enter into the fabric of the story; in other words, so long as they are of structural importance. And there are many details which we can assume to be structurally important in a long novel and which would not be important in a five thousand word short story. There are, for instance, plenty of short stories in which the colour of the heroine's hair and eyes is not mentioned. But it would be difficult to imagine a full-length novel which did not state or at least convey to us by inference these elemental details. And the moment we go beyond the more ordinary variations of physical appearance, and especially if we overstep the boundary line of the normal and verge upon physical deformity, we must be sure that such deformity is essential to the story we have to tell and that without it our story would have been radically different or else have remained untold. The one excuse for that very repulsive novel, *Sir Richard Carmody*, is that without the special deformity of the central figure there would have been no story to write. The hidden ears of Donatello in *The Marble Faun* is another and pleasanter illustration of the case in point. The whole story hinges upon the question raised in the reader's mind whether those ears were like those of any normal man, or whether they were furry and pointed. Indeed, this illustration is even better than it seemed at first sight because it is a rather rare case of a physical detail which is left vague for each reader to fill in as he pleases, and yet at the same time is, by a trick of suggestion, so sharply defined that, whatever you finally choose to think, you cannot for an instant escape from the startling vividness of one abnormal possibility.

A very good way in which to convince ourselves that the real masters of fiction do not describe their characters beyond the extent necessary to an understanding of the part they play in the story, is to call to mind the mingled feeling of surprise, disappointment and resentment that we have all felt over the attempt of some artist to realise some of our favourite characters in a series of illustrations. Sometimes, of course, an artist blunders from not having read the text with sufficient care. But far more often the source of our disappointment lies in that element in the portrait about which

the novelist has remained silent and which the artist has conceived in a manner utterly different from our own conception.

Somebody will be quite likely to raise the objection that the whole theory herein set forth, that description should always be limited only to the structural necessities of the story, leaving a sufficient liberty to each reader to fill in details to suit himself, contradicts the admirable law laid down by Maupassant who in turn received it from Flaubert: that if you are describing a field or a tree, a horse or a man, you should study and ponder over the outward physiognomy of the object you are depicting until you have found the one inevitable word or phrase that will bring out with the utmost possible brevity and conciseness the difference between that field or tree or horse or man and all the others in the whole world. But in reality there is no contradiction here. The very fact that Maupassant requires us to seek for the one inevitable word or phrase instead of the hundred words or hundred phrases shows that he does not for an instant mean that we must give a complete and exhaustive picture of the object we are trying to draw. On the contrary, the whole principle of description with him is impressionism; to convey a portrait with the fewest and sharpest lines possible. His mind seized upon some one detail, whether in the tree or in the horse, that made it different to him from all others; and his purpose was accomplished, if he succeeded in making you or me see a tree or a horse that to us was different from all the others we had ever seen. Whether our exceptional tree or horse was identical with his was entirely beside the question; we might even imagine a case where, if he had given a greater abundance of detail, his tree or horse might have ceased in our eyes to be individual and have become a commonplace experience.