A NOTE ON THE ENGLISH NOVEL

By Frank Swinnerton

IT is rather curious to recall that the English novel, after various false starts in Elizabethan times, arose almost accidentally in the eighteenth century. There had been, all through the seventeenth century, sketches of types, such as those of Earle (very much better than anything else in this line except the earlier ventures of Dekker); and then there were little tales and character sketches in the periodical essays, about which a great deal has been written. It does not seem to me that these type sketches were really influences of the importance often claimed by literary historians. When the novel genuinely began it was on lines altogether different. It showed no affinity to the type sketches. It did not concentrate upon characteristics. Defoe eschewed characterization, and made his people appear convincing by the honesty with which he accumulated verisimilitude. Richardson practically ignored externals or "traits" (with which writers of the character sketches concerned themselves), and diffused over many pages the results of his patient but extraordinary insight into emotions. Neither Defoe nor Richardson had any use for idiosyncrasies.

It is rather odd that the first celebrated venture into plain narrative should have been undertaken by an elderly pamphleteer and political agent; and it is even more odd that the first psychological novel should have been the work of an elderly printer, who wrote to reform the morals of maid servants. There was only didacticism in common between the two books, if we except what, in our present study, is of far more importance — the amazing fidelity of detail which is common to both. If by some freak of chronology "Robinson Crusoe" and "Pamela" could now be published for the first time we should find in all the reviews of both books the word "meticulous". We should be told, very likely, that Daniel Defoe belonged to the school of Arnold Bennett; and that Samuel Richardson belonged to the school of Henry James. As in one section of the community the first inquiry made about a man is the name of the school he went to, so in another the first inquiry is the name of the school he belongs to. One then calls that the dull school and rests content with one's insight. And it would seem to us very clear that Mr. Defoe must have learned at least his faithfulness through Arnold Bennett from the French, and that Mr. Richardson must have learned his interminable examinations of the heart through Henry James from the same source. We should think him a little more "daring" than his master, and a little less cryptic. Fortunately the dates are there, and our historians have told us that Richardson had a tremendous Continental vogue in the eighteenth century, which has no doubt continued, spreading its influence, until the present day; so our first impulse to invert the true order would be set right, and we should realize that Richardson was one of the fathers of the French novel,

and, as it were, kept two establishments.

While, therefore, Defoe remained comparatively solitary as a literary force, and was considerably neglected for a hundred and fifty years, Richardson immediately produced a new movement in literature. Abroad, his serious sentiment was rapidly converted into appalling sensibility, and indeed many psychological novelists of all nations have rendered that school an easy butt. At home, however, the poignant realness of "Pamela" and its successors, while continuing suitably to edify the many, came up against a very pleasing British trait. This trait is the one which, I suggest, has gone side by side in England with just that honest faithfulness which Defoe and Richardson had in common, that scrupulous rendering, upon the one hand of goats and boots and grains, and upon the other of every smallest incident in a series of episodes affecting a few lives.

I regard the two traits as characterizing all that is best in the spirit of the English novel. They are to be found in all those novelists of the past whose books can be read with enjoyment today. On the one side a sober preoccupation with common and simple ways of life, seen clearly and very exactly described: on the other side the comic spirit, taking innumerable colorings and liberties, but remaining persistently present all the time. Where the comic spirit has failed, where (as in Thackeray) it has had a tearful pseudo-cynicism watering it down to a lower strength, or where (as in George Eliot) it has taken the form of a rather homeopathic wiseacre-ishness, the reputation of the author has waned or will wane. It has waned in this case of George Eliot because her novels want lightness; it is waning in the case of Thackeray because we get our sentimentality more easily from the illustrated daily newspapers. But we shall find in all our profoundly admirable novelists, from Fielding to Jane Austen, from Scott to Hardy, from Smollett and Sterne to Dickens, from Peacock to Meredith, from Samuel Butler to Mr. Wells and Mr. Bennett, roughly, and with obvious exceptions of one or the other quality, the same broad basis of common sense, scrupulous adherence to realness as the author saw it, and a non-malignant humor which has led to comedy, to farce, to tragedy, and even to a sort of knockabout grotesqueness, without losing its "enjoying" and almost nonsensical character.

It has been otherwise in other countries, where the art of the novel has perhaps been cultivated with more finesse. The English novel has not, morally or technically, been very enterprising; it has never produced a Dostoyevsky, a Stendhal, or a Balzac: it has had few masters of form, no men who could write the novel as Turgenev wrote it, as Chekhov might have written it, or as even Guy de Maupassant, with his masterly power of conveying information, as it were, in transit, wrote it; but it has never lacked for men and women who saw life as humanists and treated it in the humane and tolerant spirit of their vision. Even that dark era of the last half of the nineteenth century, when the philistines ran riot with mediocre products for subscription libraries, is rescued for us by the several exceptions already named or implied, or it may be studied in the works of Sir Walter Besant, James Payn, Grant Allen, etc., as a time when humor still retained power to redeem works otherwise negligible. Though the books were not taken seriously as transcripts or interpretations of life by their authors, at least

the authors made sure that nobody else should take them seriously on any ground whatever.

Fielding it was, then, who introduced this new quality into the English novel. Without him, Richardson might have set the example for the whole period; and even so there is a great deal of post-Richardsonian fiction which has sensibility as its most striking characteristic. Fielding's own sister, although diverted from the epistolary novel by her brother's success in another technique, and led into the method of Odyssey writing by his two first novels, developed no humor and seems to have set the tone for many subsequent feminine writers. But Fielding himself, reading one day (as all his world was doing) the pitiable distresses of "Pamela", was provoked to ribaldry. He resolved hastily, with the same recklessness which had carried him into so many feeble dramatic experiments, to make game of this melancholy tale. He imagined a young man, own brother to Pamela, whose virture was equally threatened — by the attacks of his employer, a lady of immodesty. Having invented for the Mr. B. of "Pamela" a name, Squire Booby, and having made Joseph Andrews receive with innocent unresponsiveness the advances of his mistress, Fielding tired of the parody, found himself engrossed by his original comic inventions, and continued with his book, making it the first comic novel of English life. He was not uninfluenced by foreign works, for of course "Don Quixote" and "Gil Blas" were both known to him; but since he could not attain to the superb equable irony of "Don Quixote" he proceeded in accordance with his own happy English temperament. He showed what the novel might be. He saved it from a possible sterility which might have followed the decay of Richardson; and he made other writers see the possibilities of the English picaresque, the English comedy.

Thenceforward the course was clear. Smollett and Sterne opened up still newer paths; and it was only toward the end of the century, when these men were dead, when Fanny Burney had lost her high spirits in the atmosphere of a court and the persistent "éloges" of her father and his fellow toadies, that the novel relapsed upon Gothicism. I do not know whether this relapse was due to absorption from Germany, or whether it was merely the result of a passing absurdity in the English mind and a poverty of skill in the discovery of material; but it brought the novel to a low pitch. On the one hand there were old English barons and mad mothers and Udolphic mysteries and preposterous castles of Otranto; on the other hand there were the dregs of Richardson and Sterne gathered into the feeble tales of Henry Mackenzie. The flood was exhausted. The intellectual novel of Godwin arose — a kind that may be said to have risen again from time to time in the works of George Eliot and possibly even George Gissing. It had very little life. It was then that Scott, in need of money, in need also of a fresh field for inexhaustible activity, turned to his knowledge of Scottish life and history. Once more the novel was started upon a new current. But in the middle of this tremendous stream, ignoring Scott, ignoring his imitators, and continuing, as she thought, the tradition of Fanny Burney, Jane Austen was writing six masterpieces in a quite different genre.

While Scott was mingling with his great humor and wonderful pictorial gift a more doubtful romanticism and very reactionary political ideals, the first real domestic novels were written. There was little resemblance between

Jane Austen and Miss Burney, either in theme or in manner. Assuredly, while the earlier writer was a bright girl turned solemn, Jane Austen was a genius beginning the English novel all over again. She was still in the English tradition, simple, detailed, and humorous; but she was an artist as no English novelist had ever before been an artist — she was an artist dealing in beautiful simplicity of form, and in the most delicate finenesses of delineation. She is, above all others, the English novelist from whom those of today could learn perfection in their craft; for in spite of her intricate weaving she was ideally selective, and her finish did not prevent her from insisting upon the essential characteristics of her dramatis personæ.

And some years after the death of Jane Austen began what is called the Golden Age of the English novel, which we are still trying to live down. We had the enormous works of Dickens and Thackeray, followed by the almost (if not quite) as enormous works of Mrs. Gaskell, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Mrs. Craik, the Brontës, Charles Reade, Wilkie Collins. . . . What a collection! To name them, to think of the innumerable books which, collectively, they wrote with such unpardonable assiduity, appals one! Here and there one comes across single significant figures, certainly among these writers, and even among those who followed them. Dickens was a comic genius, Anthony Trollope was a second rate master, one at least of the Brontës was a genius. We had Meredith, Hardy, George Gissing, Mark Rutherford. Among all the Mrs. Riddells, the Charles Gibbons, the Alan St. Aubins, the Mrs. Hungerfords, the Mrs. Alexanders, Mrs. MacQuoids, David Christie Murrays, men and women were writing whose work was not the dreary succession of artistic stillbirths that we see elsewhere. Bret Harte wrote at least one magnificent short novel, in "Cressy"; Rhoda Broughton kept a lamp of shining laughter brightly burning. There were others, as a moment's thought will serve to recall. But what was the novel doing during the nineteenth century? It had established itself as prime favorite in a prosperous age, and it had no history, only a vomiting of books which were proudly claimed to be "only stories", "only novels". Fifty, seventy, a hundred years after Jane Austen had withered the "only a novel" fancy by a few pointed remarks upon the novelist's craft, things were worse with the English novel than they had ever been. Why was that? I trace the decadence to Thackeray, who said that novels were "sweets", and to the other novelists who apparently thought they should be bath buns. Trollope, with his marketable commodities, was as bad as any; but at least his good books are separable from his bad ones. Yet the reign of popular novelists (I had almost said "the rain") was a long one. We had our Mrs. Henry Woods, our Charlotte Yonges, our Rosa Nouchette Careys, our William Blacks (the late Justin McCarthy wrote in his "History of Our Own Times" that Thomas Hardy was "far less surely the master of his own craft" than William Black), our Robert Buchanans, our Sarah Tytlers, and twenty others, all prolific, all sure of prosperity and a public, all sure of eventual oblivion. And yet there are some who regard the present age as degenerate!

The trouble about the present age is that it is too self conscious. We are querulous. Robert Louis Stevenson introduced himself into English literature, and was mistaken for a master.

He was not really, perhaps, a master, because although his work has charm it has no prime originality. But Stevenson did one very great thing. He became a personality. Some time after 1880, Stevenson became generally known. He was not, even then, so universally popular as we like to think, and although prolific he was not self supporting; but he had been in France, and he claimed to be an artist. The word "artist", heard, as it were, for the first time (at least, in relation to a popular writer), paralyzed the English public. When it found that Stevenson was a perfectly moral author, very engaging, and not original enough to be disquieting, but wayward, varied, stimulating enough to be read with amusement, it thought artists might be very good people to have about the place. Further shocks were in store. Other writers about this time went to Paris, imbibed fashions and traits and tricks. They were parodied, talked about. Journalism took a good turn. Younger writers still were getting born and coming up into the columns of newspapers with their bright morning faces. "Artists . . ." said the English public. "Queer people. Effeminate. All mad." But the English public was made to talk about these "artists". They became public figures. One heard about them. The older writers became suddenly shabby — shabby but popular. The artist arose in succession to the Victorian giant. That is one reason why we should be grateful to Stevenson and his contemporaries. They accomplished a sort of *coup de main*. It is true that their literary works were not of the highest class; but at least their personalities were fresh. They were a breakaway. The fact that they were also *fin de siècle* is a misfortune, but it does not affect the work accomplished, which was that of overthrowing the mid-Victorian tradition of rather smaller giants. These artists may have been skeletons, or what Pascal called thinking reeds; but anything is better than such an abnormality as a small giant.

I said just now that journalism took a good turn. It was perhaps inevitable that when the journalists began to write novels (nowadays novelists turn to journalism) they should write with one eye on the journalistic touch. Both Kipling and Barrie were journalists. Crockett and Ian Maclaren were also offshoots from another stem. The outlook was bad. It was destined to be very bad at the turn of the century; when, suddenly, after the Boer War, everybody felt very tired of heroics and sentimental romance and heard with pleasure of some other young journalists who wanted to say something different. The modern "creative artist" came into being. He is still in being; though one does not know, of course, what the immediate future will produce. The modern "creative artist" is between two fires. Upon the one side are those who are taking him too seriously, and scrutinizing his reputation from week to week and from book to book. Upon the other side are the aristocrats of letters, who find the "creative artist" rather too plebeian, rather too much like an ordinary man, and above all rather too critical for their taste. Their objections to him are probably, I think, based upon the assumption that what is offered in the strictly contemporary novel is too much a critical reflex of their own time and their own lives. It is true that invention in the novel has lately been at a low ebb: there has been too much intensive study of the lives of middle class and lower middle class people. If, as I hoped before the war, this study could become an interpretation of

ideals, it would point onward to fresh fields. It is based upon society in a way that old novels were not. It seems to me (though I know the opinion is bound to be challenged) that the contemporary novel has its roots in reality; but that possibly (this is an admission to its critics) it is only indirectly constructive. It is scientific rather than romantic. Is it therefore unimaginative? We must remember that, living as we do in an urban, closely knit society, the novel has been bound to describe an urban society; and that, having chosen its *milieu* (not with a clear choice, but with a natural impulse to work in a familiar setting), the novelist has been bound to observe the practices of that urban society, which practices make up nine tenths of the superficial life of urban dwellers. Avoid the superficial, and you plunge at once into psychology. That there is a way out, I am sure. That it is a way, not of romance, but of English humor, I am also sure. We are at present imitating the Russians and the French, greatly to the benefit of our technique. Some novelists are imitating the Russians also in mood. That is where they are wrong. For in the attitude to life of the English speaking people is to be found the true attitude to life of those who speak for their generation. If novelists do not do that, it does not seem to me to be of any use to speak of the art of the novel at all. Our novelists might just as well write merely to divert. And to do that would be to slip back to the bad times of prosperity, so that the good work of two centuries would be thrown away.