

By the same author

An Introduction to the English Novel

VOLUME II: HENRY JAMES TO

1950

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
THE ENGLISH NOVEL

VOLUME I  
TO GEORGE ELIOT

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## PREFACE

The purpose of this book and its successor (which will bring the story up to the present day) is not to attempt a history of the English novel. But because the novel, like every other literary form, is a product of history, I have tried, in the first two Parts, to indicate something of the historical development of fiction and to face—if not to answer satisfactorily—the essential questions: why did the novel arise at all, and why should it have arisen when it did?

The third part of the book makes even less claim to exhaustiveness. I have taken nine well-known nineteenth-century novels (of which six are included in the present volume) and tried to bring out in analysis certain critical questions which emerge from a study of each. Three reasons in particular have led me to adopt this method: (1) the field, by the nineteenth century, has become so wide that an exhaustive treatment would be in any event impossible, (2) novels tend to be rather long and for any course of study in this subject it is useful to concentrate on a reading list that is both short and accessible, and (3) critics of the novel appear to have shirked, with a few honourable exceptions, the business of analysis and of disciplined critical evaluation. Although I would not for a moment claim to have said the last word about any of the books treated here I have consistently tried to get to the heart of each novel, to pose the questions: what *kind* of a novel is this? What is it about? It is not enough to consider a novel, any more than a poem or a play, simply in terms of plot-construction and characters. We have to see each novel whole before we can attempt to assess the parts or even to decide the criteria relevant to our judgments.



Of course the choice of my novels is somewhat arbitrary. I do not claim that they are the nine best nineteenth-century novels. I have left out plenty of books I would have liked to have included and I feel a particular pang in having represented Dickens, the greatest of the English novelists, by a book which is by no stretch of the imagination his best, though I believe it is underrated. My only claim for my chosen books is that they are all good novels (though not equally good), all readily accessible, and that they happen to raise a variety of critical problems which have a general interest and significance.

The original plan of this book meant stopping, with Conrad, at the beginning of the present century. And yet to leave off there was clearly unsatisfactory. Everything would be left in the air; to raise and yet not to attempt to answer any of the problems of our own contemporary fiction would seem irritating and somewhat cowardly. And so it was decided to bring the whole survey (it should not really be given so portentous a name) up to date and to divide it into two volumes. The present volume ends with *Middlemarch*. It is not an inappropriate break, for George Eliot's great novel is in a number of respects the culminating point of Victorian fiction. The volume that is to follow will begin with the consideration of novels by Henry James and Samuel Butler (very unlike and yet both somehow distinctly nearer to our own century than George Eliot) and go on to examine some of the tendencies and experiments in the fiction of the twentieth century.

I should like to thank many friends who, through their advice and conversation, have helped in the writing of this book; particularly Professor Bonamy Dobrée, Mr Douglas Jefferson, Mr Edward Thompson, Mr Alick West and Professor Basil Willey. My sense of gratitude to them is equalled only by my concern that they should not be associated with the book's many imperfections or with judgments (there are many) which they do not share. There is another debt too which I would not wish to be ambiguous or at least more ambiguous than all such debts are. I have used throughout the book to describe a particular kind of novel the term 'moral fable'. The phrase, so far as I know, is Defoe's, but it has been used and, so to speak, developed in recent years by Dr F. R. Leavis. I hope that in using the term, as I believe I have, in a sense rather more narrow than his habitual use of it I have not compromised a critic to whom anyone who has done any serious thinking about the English novel must owe a particular debt.

A. K.

## PART I

### Introductory



## LIFE AND PATTERN

Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous effort keeps Fiction on her feet. HENRY JAMES

We might as well start—when we have finished our preliminaries—with Bunyan and Defoe. The starting-point is neither original nor inevitable, but it is convenient. For Bunyan and Defoe are both great figures in their own right, the first writers whom no consideration of the English novel could possibly leave out, and they also happen to belong to two separate lines in the development of prose fiction which make useful, though by no means water-tight, categories.

This business of 'lines' and 'categories' is, we should realise, extremely dangerous. If it were not that its opposite—the refusal to differentiate, to recognise that, say, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Wuthering Heights* are as different in kind as *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Major Barbara*—has been one of the banes of novel criticism, one would be tempted to try to dispense with it altogether.

It is always dangerous to take a work of art apart and to abstract from it particular qualities. Once one has pigeon-holed a book or dissected it there is the danger that one may never again see it whole. Moreover, one aspect of a book is always closely connected, if not interwoven with another. You cannot really separate, say, 'character' from 'plot', 'narrative' from 'background'.

People often talk of these things [wrote Henry James] as if they had a kind of internecine distinctness, instead of melting into each other at every breath, and being intimately connected parts of one general effort of expression. I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks, nor conceive, in any novel worth discussing at all, of a passage of des-



cription that is not in its intention narrative, a passage of dialogue that is not in its intention description, a touch of truth of any sort that does not partake of the nature of incident, or an incident that derives its interest from any other source than the general and only source of the success of a work of art—that of being illustrative. *A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of the other parts.*<sup>1</sup>

This is well said, definitively said perhaps, and chastening. It cannot be too often insisted that criticism, analytical or historical (and the terms themselves are not mutually exclusive), the tracing of lines of development, the setting of a book in its historical background, is useless and misleading unless it brings us to a fuller, richer, more complete view of the book we are considering. It may be to the purpose of the historian, the sociologist, the psychologist, to abstract from particular novels factors which illustrate and enrich his own study; it may even be to the purpose of the literary critic, in so far as he too is necessarily concerned with history, with placing and elucidating literary developments, thus to abstract. But we must always remember that the ultimate concern of the study of literature is evaluation, the passing of judgment on each particular work of art.

Yet it is impossible to evaluate literature in the abstract; a book is neither produced nor read in a vacuum and the very word 'value' involves right away criteria which are not just 'literary'. Literature is a part of life and can be judged only in its relevance to life. Life is not static but moving and changing. Thus we have to see both literature and ourselves in history, not as abstract entities. 'Criticism', as the nineteenth-century Russian critic Belinsky put it, 'is aesthetics in motion.' Though we must see each novel as a part of history and its value as the quality of its contribution to the achievement of man's freedom, yet it is important to remember that it is the book *itself* we are judging, not its intention, nor the amount of 'social significance' to be got out of it, nor even its importance as a measurable historical influence.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been, in this last sense, a more important book than *Wuthering Heights*; but it is not a better book. For whereas *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can bring to the reader's attention facts he had previously ignored and has pricked men's consciences and urged them into action on behalf of what they knew to be just and necessary, *Wuthering Heights* has that within it which can *change*

<sup>1</sup> Superior figures refer to Notes and References, pp. 179–81.

men's consciousness and make them aware of what previously they had not even guessed. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may enlarge the realm of our knowledge, *Wuthering Heights* enlarges that of our imagination.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin's* contribution to human freedom (which, heaven knows, one doesn't wish to undervalue) is in a sense fortuitous. Someone else might have written something else which had roughly the same effect. It was an act of courage rather than an act of art (and if an American Negro tells me it is worth more to him than *Wuthering Heights* I cannot argue). But no one else could have—or at any rate has—written anything very like *Wuthering Heights*, and no reader who has responded fully to *Wuthering Heights* is ever, whether he realises it or not, quite the same again.

This said, it may be permissible to suggest that there are in all novels which are successful works of art two elements, emphatically not separate and yet to some extent separable. These are the elements of life and pattern. Art, as T. E. Hulme has put it, is life-communicating; it must give us a sense that what is being conveyed across to us by the words on the page is life or, at any rate, has something of the quality of life. Novels which do not give us this sense of life, which we do not respond to with a certain quickening of our faculties, which we do not feel—in Keats' famous but never-bettered phrase—'upon our pulses', such novels may be worth an inquest but not a second edition. At the same time the good novel does not simply convey life; it says something about life. It reveals some kind of pattern in life. It brings significance.

It must be emphasised that the two elements—life and pattern—are not separate. If we ask of any particular novel that 'lives' the question, 'what is it that gives it vitality?' we shall find that the vitality is inseparable from the novelist's view of life, which is what decides what he puts into every sentence and what he leaves out.

In that wonderful first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, which 'comes alive' so immediately and gives so sharp and yet so subtle a sense of life, so that we know at once so much about the Bennet family, this 'life' would not be there but for Jane Austen's tone, her ironical opening generalisation, her choice of words, her italics, her decision at each point and moment as to just how and where her reader's attention shall be directed. Even a photograph involves choice—of subject, composition, light—which reveals something of the photographer's mind; with the writer—even the most apparently photographic in technique—the issue is infinitely wider because every word he uses involves a choice, a choice dependent



(though he may not be aware of it) on the kind of man he is, on his view of life, on the significance he attaches to what he sees.

And yet, despite all this, it will be generally agreed that in some novels 'life' is more obviously there than 'pattern'. There are writers, and great ones, whose books have more vividness than wisdom, more vitality than significance. *David Copperfield* is such a book. It is a novel almost completely lacking what I mean by pattern. The earlier parts, perhaps, have a kind of pattern, the pattern of David's struggles (passive as they tend to be) against the forces of darkness—Murdstone and the London factory; but once these struggles have been obliterated (not solved) by a *dea ex machina*, Betsy Trotwood, pattern disappears altogether and is replaced only by plot, anecdote, contrivance and an insistence on 'characters' (the inverted commas are inevitable) like the Micawbers.

The result is that though *David Copperfield* conveys something of life it tells us very little about life. It is hard to say what it is about, except that it is about David Copperfield, and there again David's life is not presented to us in a way that can reasonably be called significant. He is born, has a bad stepfather and a kind aunt, goes through a number of adventures, marries twice (the problems of the first, unsatisfactory marriage being conveniently shelved by Dora's death), gets to know a good many people including some delightful ones, and it is all (or most of it) quite interesting and frequently very amusing; but that is all. There is no pattern.

Pattern is not something narrowly 'aesthetic', something which critics like Clive Bell used to talk about as 'form' (as opposed to life or content). Pattern is the quality in a book which gives it wholeness and meaning, makes the reading of it a complete and satisfying experience. This is a matter partly, but only partly, discussable in terms used by the devotees of 'form'. Sometimes the pattern of a book does have a geometrical quality. Mr E. M. Forster has discussed Henry James's *The Ambassadors* in such terms;<sup>2</sup> *The Spoils of Poynton* has an even more strongly marked formal pattern. An early example of pattern of this kind is Congreve's *Incognita*, a pretty little story in which two pairs of lovers intrigue, pirouette and exchange partners with the kind of grace and precision one associates with a formal aristocratic dance of the eighteenth century.

The value of this kind of geometrical 'form' is an interesting question. In general we should, I think, treat it with some suspicion because of the tendency to use such forms for their own sake, that is to say for no good reason. To give your story the pattern of a figure of eight is only worth while in so far as that

pattern has a significance relevant to what you are saying. Abstract geometrical patterns do in fact have some significance in relation to life. So do such formal patterns as are evolved in dances which clearly have a direct relationship to courtship or harvest rituals.

Again, many mental processes have their fairly precise formal equivalents: the 'shape' of *The Ambassadors* which Mr Forster compares to an hour-glass is, in effect, the formal equivalent of what the Greeks called *peripeteia*, that reversal of a situation from which, as Aristotle noted, so much both of irony and tragedy has sprung. This, I think, is the point. 'Form' is important only in so far as it enhances significance; and it will enhance significance just in so far as it bears a real relation to, that is to say symbolises or clarifies, the aspect of life that is being conveyed. But form is not *in itself* significant; the central core of any novel is what it has to say about life.

When we say, then, that a novel has more life than pattern we are in fact making a criticism of the quality of perception of life which the novelist is conveying. For the pattern which the writer imposes is the very essence of his vision of whatever in life he is dealing with. To say of *David Copperfield* that it is of the kind of novel that has more vividness than wisdom, more vitality than significance, is to say something which, though not meaningless, has (unless we are quite conscious of the way we are using words) many misleading overtones. For such a statement might well imply an actual separation of vitality and significance, a suggestion that significance or pattern is something to be spread like marmalade on a given surface of 'life'; whereas it is actually out of the writer's very perception of life that the significance emerges.

The vitality of *David Copperfield* is in fact limited by Dickens's failure to master and organise significantly the raw material of his novel. Mr Murdstone is more vital than Agnes precisely because Dickens's perception of him is more profound, morally and aesthetically (you cannot separate the two). The last half of the book is—except for odd snatches of idiosyncratic observation—a bore precisely because it lacks a convincing conflict, that is to say, moral significance, to give it pattern.

What, then, is the point of labouring this admittedly rather artificial distinction between life and pattern? Simply that a great many writers have, in practice, tended to separate the two and almost all have approached the business of novel-writing with a bias towards one or the other direction. They have either begun with a pattern that seemed to them valid and tried to inject life into



it, or they have begun with a fairly undefined concern with 'life' and tried to make a pattern emerge out of it. One would not for a moment suggest, of course, that this is anything but a crude simplification of the infinitely subtle and complicated question of the springs of artistic creation.

Exactly how an individual novel, or any work of art, comes into being is a fascinating problem far outside the scope of this book. What one would here stress is that there is one line in the development of the novel in the eighteenth century—a line which includes, for example, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Jonathan Wild*—in which pattern is clearly the novelist's supreme and prior consideration. In this kind of novel it is not unfair to say that the author starts with his pattern, his moral vision, and that the various elements of the novel, character and plot in particular, are continuously subordinated to and in a special sense derived from the pattern. Gulliver, for instance, though he is a convincing enough figure for Swift's purposes, has no existence of his own. We do not feel any temptation to abstract him from the story in the way that we might abstract, say, Mr Dick from *David Copperfield*.

The type of novel I am referring to has been excellently described as a 'moral fable'. Now the author of the moral fable is not necessarily more concerned with morals than other novelists. Joseph Conrad, for instance, whose novels certainly do not come within this category, saw the essential feature of a story as its 'moral discovery'. The distinction—an important one—is that in the moral fable the central discovery seems to have been made by the author prior to his conception of the book. In other words, the fable-writer starts off with his vision, his moral 'truth', and, so to speak, tries to blow life into it. In the course of this process the original 'truth' will no doubt be deepened and enriched, made living instead of abstract; but the original abstract concept will have its effect on the book.

All good novels, like all other good works of art, are concrete, not abstract, but to describe the original concept of a novel as abstract is not necessarily to condemn either the concept or the novel. A writer has to start somewhere and there is no obvious reason why the germ of his novel should not be an abstracted 'truth' capable of generalised expression. That the subject of *Candide* is the fallacy of the belief that 'all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds' does not invalidate Voltaire's novel, though it does determine the kind of novel it is. But it is clear that, if the tendency of the novelist who begins, as I think Dickens does in

*David Copperfield*, with 'life' will be to write books that are amorphous and unorganised, that of the writer of moral fables will be towards a certain rigidity.

If you start with an abstract 'truth', even a profound one, it is difficult to avoid the temptation to mould life to your vision. That is why a book like *Candide* has, for all its brilliance, a certain brittle quality. The reader cannot help feeling that any facets of life which happened not to fit in with Voltaire's thesis would stand a poor chance of gaining admission. This is not to say that there is no vitality in *Candide*; it has all the vitality of the author's fearless, incisive view of the world: but it is the vitality of Voltaire rather than of the world that comes across.

It is perhaps to get to the heart and the difficulty of the moral fable to say that it illustrates an idea about life. The idea may be a precept (as in the stories of Mrs Hannah More 'wholly holy, hale and wholly wholesome') or it may be something a good deal vaguer—a view of life (as in *Gulliver's Travels*). The key-word is 'illustrates'. Now, an illustration may be a work of art, it may enrich that which gives rise to it and stand in its own right as a successful expression. But the danger is that it will be limited in an unfortunate way by having to illustrate something else rather than develop freely by its own laws of growth. The illustration, by its nature, must never get out of hand. The purpose behind it must never be lost sight of, otherwise it will become not an illustration but something else.<sup>3</sup>

The danger, so far as the moral fable is concerned, is all the greater if what it must illustrate is a fairly precisely framed abstract idea; for abstract ideas—and particularly abstract precepts ('it's never too late to mend') have a way of being over-simplifications of life, useful enough no doubt for their purpose of the moment, but not bearing over-much probing. And good art, including the good illustration, must probe. If we begin probing the precept 'It's never too late to mend,' we find, alas, that it is sometimes not true. An illustration of it (Charles Reade's novel for instance), is very likely therefore to give us the sense not of facing all the issues of life it evokes, but of avoiding a good many of them.

One of the limitations of the moral fable is likely to be, then, the limitation inherent in an over-simplified or dishonest philosophy of life. This is indeed the limitation of Hannah More or Mr Aldous Huxley. The successful and enduring fable avoids this kind of weakness in one of two ways: either the 'truth' that it succeeds in adequately illustrating happens to be in itself so profound, so full



of the stuff of life that it can bear deep probing (Fielding's parable of bourgeois society, *Jonathan Wild*, survives, despite weaknesses, for this sort of reason), or else the writer in the telling of the fable, in the very act of illustration, so fills his creation with the breath and tensions of life that the fable transcends the idea which evoked it. *Gulliver's Travels* seems to me a book of this sort. It is a fable (or series of fables) obviously and insistently expressing Swift's moral criticism of his world. The fantasy is continually directed to this end so that there is no question of our 'losing ourselves' in the book. The whole effect depends on the degree and quality of the moral feeling involved. And yet when we ask, in terms of a precise philosophy, what Swift is saying, what moral values he is recommending, we find it impossible to give (on the evidence of the book itself) an answer adequate to the kind of experience the book has been.

Is man really the kind of creature Swift has evoked? What positive statement about life, what philosophy has been conveyed? The questions raise nothing but a hollow echo. The truth is that hardly anybody, and certainly no normal person either today or in the eighteenth century, agrees with Swift's philosophy (such as it is), or thinks the view of man he is expressing adequate. The kernel of the fable is maggot-ridden. Yet the fable remains; and its enormous moral force remains.

Swift's opinions (taken as a serious positive judgment about the nature of man) may not be acceptable to us; but his sense of life, of actual reality, is so profound and passionate that the inadequacy of his opinions does not matter. The sterility of his philosophy is negated by the vitality of his observation. That is why, in the great fourth book, as Dr Leavis has pointed out, 'The Houyhnhnms may have all the reason, but the Yahoos have all the life.'<sup>4</sup> The Yahoos may not tell us much about Man, but they tell us a deal about men, the men Swift knew, which the complacent and privileged would sooner forget or turn to favour and prettiness and falsity.\*

Those who would like to preserve the illusion of eighteenth-century society as a whole world of elegant refinement and rational, even if aristocratic, beneficence, are forced to carry Swift off to the psycho-analyst's consulting-room. He has, we are assured, all the

\* It would be an oversimplification to equate crudely the Houyhnhnms with the eighteenth-century aristocracy, polite, 'enlightened', rational, and the Yahoos with the masses in their gin-soaked squalor; but the contrast is there and the dissatisfaction we feel with the Houyhnhnms whose wisdom is always slightly off the mark matches precisely the human inadequacy, for all its 'enlightenment', of eighteenth-century rationalism.

symptoms of the anal-erotic, and this explains everything.<sup>5</sup> It is not rare or new, this concern

to mock with the aspersion of Madness  
Cast on the Inspired by the tame high finisher of paltry Blots  
Indefinite, or paltry Rhymes, or paltry Harmonies. . . .

and, as Blake well knew, it is among the most effective of the manacles which the minds of certain men have forged for their own purposes. But it does not explain away *Gulliver's Travels* because it does not begin to explain the quality of the indignation which brings Swift's fable to life. *Gulliver's Travels* does not need twentieth-century psychiatry for its interpretation; if we find it hard to understand (and there is no good reason why we should), Hogarth's pictures and Fielding's novels will give us more hints than Freud.

But my immediate point is that *Gulliver's Travels* succeeds as a moral fable despite the weaknesses of Swift's positive philosophy. It succeeds entirely on account of the quality of Swift's indignation, which is what brings the fable to life and stirs our imagination. It is this life-stirring quality, the sense of the degradation of man in Swift's world, which makes *Gulliver's Travels* a great book and renders unimportant the inadequacy of Swift's positive philosophy. There is an anger in *Gulliver's Travels*, a bitter anger at what man has made of man, which springs not from an abstract idea nor from a neurotic sensibility, but from a courageous realism, an ability to look the facts of eighteenth-century society in the face, an unflinching sense of life. And it is this that Swift has breathed into his fable and into his prose.

Literary critics who think that style in writing is a pretty accomplishment, like arranging the flowers, often tell you that Swift's prose style is a model to be copied by those who want to write well. But you will only write like Swift if you feel as Swift felt and see life as he saw it.

The moral fable, then, is one kind of novel, one line of development which we shall trace in the eighteenth century, from Bunyan onwards. It does not, of course, originate with Bunyan. Its roots are in the parables of the Bible, the Morality plays of the Middle Ages, the sermons which for centuries the common people had listened to every Sunday in every village and town throughout the land. It is a part of that great allegorical tradition which had eaten so deep into the consciousness of medieval man. We have already



noticed that its pattern derives from and illustrates some kind of generalised moral concept or attitude. And we shall see that this insistence on pattern is its strength, but can easily, if the pattern is inadequate, become its weakness.

There is also, in contrast to the moral fable, another line of English fiction which springs from an opposite kind of interest in life. Nashe and Defoe and Smollett deal, in varying degrees, with moral issues, but the germ of their books is never an idea, never an abstract concept. They are not in any sense allegorists. They are less consciously concerned with the moral significance of life than with its surface texture. Their talent is devoted first and foremost to getting life on to the page, to conveying across to their readers the sense of what life as their characters live it really feels like. If any pattern emerges from their books it is not the kind of pattern that is imposed upon the material by the writer's conscious philosophy, but one which somehow or other springs out of the 'sense of life' in the particular book.

If the moral fable grew out of the 'morality' literature of the Middle Ages and is a development of the allegory, the new non-allegorical story was a direct product of the breakdown of the medieval world. It is associated in particular with such developments as the growth of science and the beginnings of journalism. It is not by chance that both Nashe and Defoe were journalists and pamphleteers, caught up in the topical issues of their day less through any passionate moral partisanship than through a lively concern with the exciting business of living and making a living. Their dominant interest was in what has come to be called in a debased currency 'human interest'.

Now, 'human interest' implies today a concern with life which is not a generalised moral interest and is certainly the very opposite of allegorical. 'Human interest stories' in our papers, in so far as they are not entirely trivial or sensational, are the bits and pieces of life, the odd corners of experience, sometimes bizarre, sometimes typical, but never, by an essential rule, 'significant'; that is to say, you are never expected to draw any conclusion from them except the vague overall conclusion: well, life's like that.

The atom bomb is dropped on Hiroshima and the event of it is front-page news, 'dramatic', 'sensational', 'of far-reaching consequences' according to taste. The political and moral implications are examined, with whatever inadequacy, in the leading articles. And then, gradually, there creep in the 'human interest stories': what it felt like to be in Hiroshima when the bomb fell, what it felt

like to pull the lever that dropped the bomb, the kind of life the pilot led when he wasn't dropping atom bombs, how long the trams stopped running, how Mr Mitsuoto made his miraculous escape. It is precisely the fact that the 'human interest story' in our newspapers is nearly always presented from a morally neutral standpoint, without significance, that makes it so often rather disgusting. A concern with the texture of life which is not accompanied by an attempt to evaluate the experiences recorded is bound to be in the end irresponsible. And this is the danger of the novelist who thinks he can ignore pattern.

It would not be fair to Nashe—and even less fair to Defoe—to couple them with the debased qualities of modern sensational journalism. Their human interest (humanism is perhaps a juster word) is not that of the Sunday papers. But it has nevertheless some important implications. What made their novels possible was the new attitude to the world brought about by the decadence of feudal society. Nashe and Defoe, separated as they are by more than a century, are both bourgeois writers, anti-romantic in their attitudes, inspired (though in different ways) by the confidence, the optimism, the enterprise of the class which acquired its wealth and culture through commerce—especially the wool-trade—and lived by the exploitation of paid employees.

Defoe, as we shall see, accepts the Puritan morality of his class, and is at pains to establish his moral bona fides. Yet these writers are not basically concerned with morals but with a curiosity about life, which one might describe as amoral were it not that every action and response has its moral implications, however unconscious of them the individual concerned may be.

The point is that such writers *accept* bourgeois morality (still unconventional and imperfectly formulated in Nashe's time, more respectable by Defoe's), and, having accepted it, are no longer interested in it. Their eyes are on what men and women do; they spend far less time in judging and valuing than in observing and recording, with interest and gusto. And their vitality comes from this gusto, this unprejudiced curiosity about the facts of life, the curiosity of the scientist rather than the moralist, a curiosity that has not yet degenerated into sensationalism—though already in Nashe there are elements of that—but has still the sense of liberation, freedom from feudal fetters.

It is not fortuitous that this non-allegorical line in fiction to which I am referring sprang from the picaresque stories which originated in fifteenth-century Spain and quickly spread to France



and England. The *picaro* or rogue was the social outcast, the man rejected by, and rejecting, feudal society and its morality. But if he was spewed out by the feudal order he was also fostered by it, particularly in the days of its decay. The *picaro* might be a younger son of a good family gone to the dogs, more likely he was a bastard, or he might be a nobody, a hanger-on.

Even in its heyday feudal society (partly because of the system of primogeniture) had always thrown up a considerable number of such adventurers, who could not be absorbed in the normal feudal world. They became, among other things, the recruiting material for the crusades. With the growth of trade, the tendency towards centralised monarchies, the invention of gunpowder, and—in England—the enclosures, their number greatly increased. The less fortunate dwindled into beggars (those grim skeletons in the Elizabethan cupboard); many became soldiers. The feudal kings needed mercenaries to fight their wars.

The best illustration in English literature of the social phenomenon which gave rise to the picaresque novel is the Falstaff section of *Henry IV*. (Poins would have made an admirable picaresque hero with his vitality and resource and lack of morals.) Falstaff and his cronies are of varying social origin; but they are all the rejects of feudalism, and they belong to the Elizabethan rather than to the fifteenth-century world. In another sense they do not 'belong' to any society at all. They are without roots. They have no fixed abode. They live on their wits. They have no morals except the good new rule of each for himself and the devil take the hindmost. And they mock every sanctity of the feudal world—chivalry, honour, filial piety, allegiance, even kingship.

It was with just such people that the picaresque novelists dealt. They got on to the page the sense of life of the Poinses and Bardolphs and Pistols of all Europe. And life for these folk was not something organised and serene. The qualities that emerge from the picaresque novels, from the *Lazarillo de Tormes*,<sup>6</sup> from *The Rogue*,<sup>7</sup> from *The Unfortunate Traveller*,<sup>8</sup> are violence and adventure, vividness and variety. These stories are all (despite the occasional romantic episode) realistic; the attitudes behind them range from the mischievous to the cynical; they have in them nothing of the spirit of feudal literature. And they are without pattern. Like Falstaff himself they deal with life without principle and so are ultimately at the mercy of life itself.

It was natural that Nashe, a writer responding fully in his sensibility to the new world, but not yet fully conscious of what it

meant to be a bourgeois, should write a book like *The Unfortunate Traveller*, perhaps the most remarkable picaresque story in our language. *The Unfortunate Traveller* is a hotch-potch; it has no central core to it. It is the story of the adventures of a young man, Jack Wilton, who has almost all the characteristics of the outcast rogue. He is the servant of a nobleman and therefore has a certain place in society, but in no sense does he 'belong' to that society or feel himself in any way morally bound to its standards. The sense of 'not belonging' is increased by sending him to the Continent for all his adventures. I emphasise this point because it is what determines the form of the picaresque novel, its casual shapelessness. It is a series of incidents held together by no informing plan, by nothing save the presence of the hero, who is himself a vagabond whose life has no centre and no pattern.

Behind *The Unfortunate Traveller* there is no consistent moral attitude beyond a concern in getting out of awkward situations and a rather superficial anti-Catholicism; but there is a powerful curiosity (vigorous rather than consistent) about the sixteenth-century world and a remarkable attempt to get the physical 'feel' of that world on to paper.

It is not surprising that the early picaresque stories lacked a consistent moral standpoint which might have given them pattern, for the social outcasts with whom they dealt were not yet a conscious class with a conscious ethic. Nashe's Jack Wilton, like Rabelais' Panurge, is an utterly irresponsible character who gets his vitality from his irrepressible determination to hold his own in a world for which he has no respect. But until bourgeois man had a clearer idea both of what he stood for and of what he was up against his social and literary adventures were bound to be a series of disconnected skirmishes lacking a central significance.

I shall have more to say in the next Part about Defoe and the picaresque novel. The point I want to make here is that, just as the moral fable fails unless the writer imbues his original moral concept with the stuff of life, so will the non-allegorical novel, which begins with the writer's undefined 'sense of life', fail unless he gives his 'slice of life' a moral significance, a satisfying pattern. That is why the two categories I have discussed in this section only have a limited usefulness. They serve to distinguish between two methods of approach, that is all. With the truly successful novels they have little relevance, for the greatest novels are satisfying precisely because their pattern is adequate to their sense of life and vice versa. Nor is the distinction between the tradition of the moral fable and



the picaresque tradition the distinction between writers who have a philosophy of life and those who have none. Every writer has a philosophy. The distinction is, rather, between those who are quite conscious of their philosophy and those who do not formulate their sense of life in generalised terms.

The history of the novel is, in this sense, the history of the novelists' search for an adequate philosophy of life. This is not to say that the novel *is* philosophy. A writer may hold a very profound conscious philosophy and yet be no artist (though the chances are that if his philosophy is truly profound in its human understanding his writing will achieve something of the quality of art); and a great artist may not be able to formulate his view of life satisfactorily in philosophical terms. But the view of life is nevertheless there, illuminating every word he writes, and it is his view of life which will determine the nature and the profundity of the pattern of his book. Life and pattern are not, in truth, separable. Pattern is the way life develops.

## 2

## REALISM AND ROMANCE

The moment we found ourselves, a few pages back, asking, by implication, the question, 'Why were the first novels written?' we had to begin thinking in terms of history, and it is essential that we should not run away from history. The rise and development of the English novel, like any other phenomenon in literature, can only be understood as a part of history.

History is not just something in a book; history is men's actions. History is life going on, changing, developing. We, too, are characters in history. Men make history. Every action of every man, consciously or not, is directed, satisfactorily or not, towards the solving of the myriad problems, gigantic and trivial, complex and random, first of keeping alive and then of 'living', with all that the word, after centuries of experience, implies. Living alters. It alters according to the degree to which man masters his problems, wins new battles with nature, solves the countless difficulties and possibilities of existing alongside other men. History is the process of change in living.

It is not by chance that the English novel dates from the eighteenth century. This does not mean, of course, that nothing like a novel existed before the year 1700 and then someone—Defoe presumably—waved a wand and there it was. We have already taken a glance at some of the writing on which the eighteenth-century novelists could draw. Nothing will come of nothing, and even the most original artist starts off from what has gone before.

The eighteenth-century novelists had on the one hand the medieval romance and its successors, the courtly novels of Italy and



France, and the English stories which in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had grown out of these two main sources: Lyly's *Euphues*, Sidney's *Arcadia*, Greene's *Menaphon*, Ford's *Ornatus and Artesia*, Congreve's *Incognita*, the stories of Mrs Aphra Behn, to mention only a few of the best known. And they had on the other hand the 'rogue' novels, the picaresque tradition which we have already briefly noticed. They had also translations from the classics (not to mention their originals) like *Daphnis and Chloe* and the *Golden Ass* and the *Satyricon* of Petronius. They had Boccaccio. They had Rabelais (Urquhart and Motteux' translation appearing between 1653 and 1694). They had the Authorised Version of the Bible. They had Cervantes. They had Bunyan.

It may appear pedantic to try to decide which of these writers should be called novelists. Certainly from many points of view it is of no importance what they are called, and certainly one does not wish to fall into a formalistic approach, than which there is little more futile. And yet, to avoid unnecessary confusion of terms, one or two definitions are inevitable.

The novel—as I use the term in this book—is a realistic prose fiction, complete in itself and of a certain length. Any such definition of a term so loosely and variously used over a long period is bound to be somewhat arbitrary. The question of length I leave, deliberately, vague. The point, I think, is that the novel is more than an anecdote and more than the exploration of one particular, more or less isolated, episode. Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*, for instance, I take to be a novel, though a short one, while Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which is a little longer, I would class as a long short story; but such borderline problems are not really important.

The adjective 'realistic' is likely to need more justification. The words 'realism' and 'realistic' are used throughout this book in a very broad sense, to indicate 'relevant to real life' as opposed to 'romance' and 'romantic', by which are indicated escapism, wishful thinking, unrealism. The distinction is not, it must be insisted, between the photographic on the one hand and the fantastic and imaginative on the other. All art involves fantasy. A highly fantastic and superficially unlikelike story like *Gulliver's Travels* I class as realistic because it has to do with the actual problems and values of life. Mrs Radcliffe's *Udolpho* or P. C. Wren's *Beau Geste*, although presented as lifelike, are romance.

Clearly in both categories degree is important. Mrs Radcliffe's stories have more relevance to life than Mr Wren's, and it is not implied that a romance can have *no* serious value, merely that in

it unrealism predominates. Similarly, nearly all fundamentally realistic novels have their romantic tint; some—like *Jane Eyre* and *Adam Bede*—are so shot through with romantic colouring as almost to cease to be serious works of art at all.

I do not pretend that either word is fully satisfactory: realism or romance. Realism has too many suggestions of mere photographic naturalism: Zola, Arnold Bennett and James T. Farrell. Romance is an even more dangerous word, on the one hand because of its connections with Romance (as opposed to Teutonic or Slav or Celtic) languages, on the other because of all the associations of the Romantic Movement, the fashionable denigrations of which one would not wish to support. But unfortunately no happier terms suggest themselves, and I therefore use realism and romance in the way I have indicated, conscious of the dangers involved, yet conscious also of the real and essential distinction underlying the terms.

If a novel is a realistic prose fiction, complete in itself and of a certain length, none of the books that have been mentioned as the store upon which the eighteenth-century writer had to draw—the fund of experience with which he began—is, with the exception of *Don Quixote* and, with certain reservations, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a novel.

Apart from the picaresque stories, the *Satyricon*, Rabelais and the Bible, none of them is, in the sense I have indicated, realistic, though a number have realistic elements. While of the realistic stories none has the self-completeness, the unity of organisation and the length which we shall find to be characteristic of the novel. *The Unfortunate Traveller* is a series of episodes, a diary almost, with no beginning and no end. The *Satyricon*, as it has come down to us, is fragmentary. The Bible is only partially, in such books as *Esther*, *Ruth* and *Job*, written in the terms we are discussing. And even *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, superb, incredible masterpiece that it is, is less a novel than a gigantic chunk of novel-matter, the clay of half a dozen never quite organised novels.

Only Cervantes—the case of Bunyan is rather different—of all the prose writers to whom Defoe and Fielding and Richardson had access, was, in the sense we have come to give the term, a novelist. And Cervantes is indeed, with Rabelais, the great genius and architect of the modern novel. We shall see how direct and yet how subtle was his influence on Fielding and we shall see what it was that gave that influence its potency. But we cannot, in a book of this length, deal, even if we should wish to, with the question of



formal 'influences'. The time has come to pose explicitly our first essential problem: why did the modern novel arise at all?

The answer can be put in a number of ways. The novel, we may say, arose as a realistic reaction to the medieval romance and its courtly descendants of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the great eighteenth-century novels are nearly all anti-romances. Or the novel, we may say, arose with the growth for the first time of a large, widely distributed reading public; with the increase of literacy the demand for reading material naturally rose and the demand was greatest among well-to-do women who were the insatiable novel-readers of the time. For such a public, spread all over England in country houses, the theatre was not a feasible form of entertainment, but the novel was perfection. Hence the length of the novels (for their readers had only too much time on their hands), hence their tone, hence their number, hence (by the end of the eighteenth century) the circulating libraries. Or the novel, we may say, grew with the middle class, a new art-form based not on aristocratic patronage but on commercial publishing, an art-form written by and for the now-powerful commercial bourgeoisie.

These answers are all a part of the truth, but they are less than the whole of it. The whole answer cannot be condensed into a sentence and is as hard to grasp as history itself. We shall not understand the rise of the English novel unless we understand the meaning and importance of the English revolution of the seventeenth century.

Great revolutions in human society change men's consciousness and revolutionise not only their social relationships, but their outlook, their philosophy and their art. Feudalism, the society of the Middle Ages, had as its principal characteristic a peculiar rigidity of human relationships and ideas which sprang inevitably from the social structure.

The basic activity of feudal society was agriculture, the basic social unit the feudal estate or manor. Towns, though they gradually grew in importance, were the exception, not the rule. The governing class, that small minority who alone had the leisure, the education, the wherewithal to develop a sophisticated art (as opposed to the unwritten folk-culture of the unlettered), owed their social superiority to their ownership of the land and their virtual ownership of their serfs. Their chief concern, inevitably, was to maintain that ownership. Since their wealth and power did not depend on technical advances, they could have no deep interest in scientific experiment or widespread education. On the contrary,

their whole interest, their very existence as the kind of people they were, demanded the preservation (with whatever sanctions, spiritual and physical, that might be necessary) of the *status quo*.

All summaries and simplifications inevitably do violence to the infinitely rich and complex processes of social and cultural change. One cannot hope to do justice in a few sentences to the whole vast complicated medieval culture. What one would emphasise here (without suggesting for a moment that there is no more to be said) is the social rigidity and intellectual conservatism of the feudal order. Such an order was bound to produce art of a particular kind and its characteristic product in the realm of prose literature was the romance.

Romance\* was the non-realistic, aristocratic literature of feudalism. It was non-realistic in the sense that its underlying purpose was not to help people cope in a positive way with the business of living but to transport them to a world different, idealised, *nicer* than their own. It was aristocratic because the attitudes it expressed and recommended were precisely the attitudes the ruling class wished (no doubt usually unconsciously) to encourage in order that their privileged position might be perpetuated. And romance performed, as it performs to this day, the double function of entertainment through titillation and the conveying in palatable form of a particular kind of philosophy of life.

Romance grew in popularity in the Middle Ages as social relationships and class differences under feudalism became increasingly rigid. The connection between the emergence of a leisured ruling class and the growth of romance is very significant. It is not, of course, that only the leisured read or listen to romantic literature; on the contrary its quality of 'substitute-living' (the evocation of a kinder, more glamorous world) especially recommends it to the unleisured, those who most need the consolations of an escape from a cruel or humdrum reality.

The important point is that as division of labour increases and classes become as a consequence more stratified the rulers come to adopt a way of life very different from that of the majority. They have long, by virtue of their ownership, lived better; now they come to live differently. The ruling-class men no longer actually till their own fields and sell their own chattels at market, but pay someone else (not necessarily in money) to do it. The ruling-class

\* I should make quite clear that I am not referring to the great medieval epics—such as the *Nibelungenlied* or the *Chanson de Roland*—which are not romance in the sense I use the word.



women, in particular, become less and less like the women of the people in activity and even in appearance. And so the ideas and attitudes of the ruling class inevitably become different. Their culture, in all its many forms, changes.

The directions in which it changes—as far as literature is concerned—all lead away from realism, the frank and uninhibited representation and consideration of the experiences and potentialities of the community as a whole.<sup>9</sup> For how can such complete frankness exist? Not only do the rulers have their own way of life and therefore their own standards and values which the people do not, cannot—except in their dreams and fantasies—share; the rulers also have their secrets, secrets they are not prepared to share with the people or even to express quite frankly and openly to themselves. And what now primarily interests the ruling class is not the people's way of life (the word 'vulgar', originally connoting simply 'of the people' takes on new overtones), but the achievement of a culture which not merely pleases but actually strengthens and defends their class. Such a culture relies, is bound to rely, not on realism (even though the occasional realistic and—to that extent—revolutionary artist, like Chaucer, appears) but on romance.

Romance, in the first place, delights and entertains the rulers without bringing them face to face with realities they would sooner put behind them. The wimpled lady of the feudal court and her modern counterpart who steps out of her limousine to ask the attendant at the circulating library for a 'nice book' are one and the same. In the second place it builds, for the edification and pleasure of those unfortunate enough to find themselves outside the privileged *élite*, a fantasy, a pseudo-world, seductive or sad, delightful or horrible, which has one unfailing quality: that, however remote it may be from reality, the values and attitudes it incorporates are such as are least likely to undermine the theories and practice of class society.

Closely connected with, indeed inseparable from, the escapist nature of romance is its function as a form of titillation, a function that has had a profound influence on the modern novel. The bulk of medieval romances did not enlarge the consciousness of their audience in any helpful way, neither does *The Blue Lagoon*; but they did give their audience a kick, so does *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The aim of such literature is not to sum up experience, not to enlarge the imagination, and not merely to provide an escape from the sordid (in many modern cases it is rather an escape *to* the sordid), but to provide sensation for sensation's sake. It thrives on

the boredom and cynicism, the blasé and jaded unfulfilment of people who have too little to do or too little purpose and satisfaction in what they do do. Its crudest form is pornography: but it has many other forms less crude though scarcely more desirable.

The world to which medieval romance transported its audience was a world of chivalry and exciting adventures, of gallant men and charming women, of bad magicians and Christian gentlemen *sans peur et sans reproche*, above all of idealised love. It is not sufficient to label this world escapist and imagine one has explained it away. All art is, in an important sense, an escape. Nor is it enough to refer to romance's idealised picture of the world as though idealisation were a form of original sin and needed no more explicit condemnation. There is a sense in which the capacity to escape from his present experience, to use his accumulated consciousness of the past to project a vision of the future, is man's greatest and distinguishing ability. We must not forget the force of Aristotle's argument that poetry is valuable precisely because it shows men not simply as they are, but as they ought to be or (in terms more sympathetic to us today) as they are capable of becoming. This fantastic quality of art, that it takes us out of the real world so that, as Shelley put it, it 'awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought', this quality is not a trivial or accidental by-product but the very essence of the value of art. If art did in fact—as the ultra-naturalistic school tends to assume—merely paint a picture of what is, it would be a much less valuable form of human activity, for it would not alter men's consciousness but merely confirm it.

What we should remember, then, about romance, is not that it involves an escape, but a particular kind of escape. Medieval romance makes no attempt to give an impression of life in the lands and times it is dealing with, but it does attempt 'to use its subject matter as a means of conveying a new philosophy'. Dr Vinaver, in the Introduction to his monumental edition of *The Works of Thomas Malory*, writes: 'Whatever the subject of the narrative (of the courtly romance) its primary function . . . was to serve as the expression of the thoughts and emotions inspired by courtly idealism, to translate in terms of actions and characters the subtle varieties of courtly sentiment and the highly sophisticated code of courtly behaviour.'<sup>10</sup> And this is as true of the seventeenth-century prose romances like *Ornatus and Artesia* as it is of the



twelfth- and thirteenth-century poets to whom Dr Vinaver is here referring.

The didactic element in romance is important. The picture of gallant knights and their ladies (usually married to somebody else) told a story which not merely elevated the feudal idea of chivalry, but as often as not had a religious sanction too. One of the principal results of the Christian world-picture in medieval romance (a world-picture generally superimposed upon an older, pagan mythology) was to emphasise a tendency to the over-simplification of ethical questions. Life becomes a battle between Good and Evil. Characters, instead of being realistic, that is to say human, that is to say neither wholly good nor wholly bad, tend to become entirely black or white. This is the effect of imposing a static, idealist moral code upon the actual movement and complexity of human behaviour. A static pattern imposed upon a changing, developing object is bound to be inadequate. The best of the romances, of course (much of Malory for instance), avoid these crudities and come thereby that much nearer realism and life.

The impulse towards realism in prose literature was part and parcel of the breakdown of feudalism and of the revolution that transformed the feudal world. Because today the term bourgeois is connected in our minds with people well-established, comfortable, conservative, it is not easy for us to think of the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class. But we must recall that this was the very class which in seventeenth-century England organised the remarkable, democratic New Model Army, cut off the King's head and established the republican Commonwealth. The commercial bourgeoisie were revolutionaries against the feudal order because the feudal order denied them freedom. It denied them freedom, physically, legally, spiritually, to do what they wanted to do, to develop the way they needs must develop.

The feudal world, based on static property-relationships, exalting an unchanging, God-ordained hierarchy in Church and State, was a prison to the rising commercial class and to their artists and thinkers. Freedom to trade, freedom to explore, freedom to investigate, freedom to invent, freedom to evolve an adequate philosophy, these were the supreme, undeniable needs of the men of the new society, and for them they were prepared, as men always must be for their necessary freedoms, to die. They were prepared to risk death on the high seas or on the battlefields; they were prepared, in full consciousness and with the black horror of the medieval hell as the reward of error, to go to the block or to

the fire. And the bourgeois writers, exalted by their vision of

a world of profit and delight,  
Of power and honour and omnipotence,

were revolutionaries too, prepared like Faustus to play for the very highest and most desperate stakes in their task of forging a new literature adequate and helpful to the revolutionary consciousness of their age.

In the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the critical period of revolutionary transformation, the main emphasis and achievement in literature was in poetry. In the eighteenth century it is in prose. The shift corresponds to the changing needs and spirit of society.

Most of us tend to assume, until we think more carefully about it, that prose is simpler, more 'natural' and therefore probably older than poetry. But we now know from anthropologists that poetry is almost certainly a more primitive and historically an earlier development than prose. Because early literature is oral and not written down it is hard to get to know very much about it, and only slowly are we beginning to delve into the fascinating problems of the origins of literature. Such a study is not, however, an academic one in the narrow sense, indeed it is one from which the pedants tend to sheer off because it brings them up against too many inconvenient questions (the whole issue is therefore too often shelved on the grounds that we have not sufficient objective material).

The basic questions involved are: what is the *purpose* of poetry and prose? What functions do they perform in primitive society and why therefore do they arise? Clearly in the light of such questions many of the stock 'theories' of literature, that it is 'self-expression', that it gives delight, that it has something to do with the eternal verities, are hopelessly inadequate. Obviously literature expresses the self of the author (though when we recall that in primitive art there is often no one 'author' the problem becomes less simple); obviously it gives delight (or no one would like reading it); obviously it has something to do with long-term truths (or we would get nothing out of Homer today); the important questions are, why? In what way? How does literature work?

It seems reasonably certain that while the earliest poetry in primitive society is connected with ritual and work and is, in Christopher Caudwell's words, 'the language of collective speech



and public emotion',<sup>11</sup> prose or non-rhythmical speech is the language of private persuasion. Poetry arises before prose not only because (in a period when writing is not yet practised) it is easier to remember and hand on (that is a consequence rather than a cause), but because it helps the people in their necessary common rituals through which they achieve their collective ability to master nature. The primitive affinity of poetry is with magic.

Prose arises later as science gradually supersedes magic and conscious control replaces instinctive emotion. Prose is a later, more sophisticated use of language than primitive poetry precisely because it presupposes a more objective, controlled and conscious view of reality. Stories—'images of men's changing lives organised in time'—can only come into existence as men become conscious, however imperfectly, of social processes and man's complicated, unending struggle against nature. This *objective* quality of prose, that it makes coherent some facet of outer reality already apprehended, is very significant. It explains, for instance, why it is more possible to translate a novel than a poem. And it explains why in eighteenth-century England there should have been a particular impulse towards prose-writing. For literature to the bourgeois writers of this period was, above all, a means of taking stock of the new society. A medium which could express a realistic and objective curiosity about man and his world, this was what they were after. It was the search for such a medium that led Fielding to describe *Joseph Andrews* as a 'comic epic poem in prose'. Their task was not so much to adapt themselves to a revolutionary situation as to cull and examine what that revolution had produced. They were themselves revolutionaries only in the sense that they participated in the consequences of a revolution; they were more free and therefore more realistic than their predecessors to just the extent and in just those ways that the English bourgeois revolution involved in fact an increase in human freedom.

We must not push too far this distinction between prose and poetry because in practice the two interpenetrate and it would be disastrous to underestimate the degree to which *all* modern novelists use language poetically. But we will do well, nevertheless, to bear in mind some of the fundamental problems involved in this difficult subject. Two points in particular are worth emphasising.

In the first place I think it is as well to approach the study of a great body of prose literature, such as the English novel, with the realisation that prose is not just poetry's plain sister, a haphazard, prosaic (how significant the word is!), inferior, easy alternative to

verse, but that it is a great and wonderful field of human activity and experiment. I think it is good to realise that the development of prose-writing is not a mean or humdrum part of man's history, but that it is linked close to his continuous, infinitely rich and various struggle to control his world and transform it, to evolve a philosophy adequate to his necessities and a society adequate to his desires. And particularly it is worth bearing in mind that prose is an advanced, subtle, precise form of human expression, presupposing a formidable self-consciousness, a delicacy of control which it has taken human beings untold centuries to acquire.

Secondly, I believe even this superficial glance at the origins of literature gives us a clue to our question: why did the novel arise when it did? Why did the medieval romance not continue to satisfy the needs of the men and women of the bourgeois revolution?

The answer, at bottom, is that the bourgeoisie, in order to win its freedom from the feudal order, had to tear the veil of romance from the face of feudalism. To the bourgeois man, as we have seen, feudal society was not satisfying but frustrating. And so he felt no impulse to defend that society and no sympathy with a literature designed to recommend its values and conceal its limitations. On the contrary his every need and instinct urged him to expose and undermine feudal standards and sanctities. Unlike the feudal ruling class he did not feel himself immediately threatened by revelations of the truth about the world and so he was not afraid of realism.

The first revolutionary bourgeois writers, like Rabelais, were by no means conscious of being bourgeois or, in any political sense, revolutionary. Rabelais is soaked in the learning and tradition of the Middle Ages; no book tells us so well as his what medieval France was like. And yet Rabelais, in his full-blooded assertion of the glory of physical living, in his colossal irreverence, in his profound and daring inventiveness, in the realism which underlies his most fantastic flights and images, is utterly anti-romantic. His exuberance and his laughter shatter every pretence of the world of chivalry. No idealised picture of genteel womanhood could be proof against the irrepressible obscenity of a Panurge.

*Gargantua and Pantagruel* enlarged the scope and potentialities of prose literature both through Rabelais' view of life (the content of the book) and his language (its form). And, as always, the form and content are inseparable. The hilarious verbal experiments, the incredible lists, the inventive energy of the style cannot be isolated from what Rabelais had to say: the flights of fantasy, the delight in science, the confidence in human reason, the respect for the human



creature in all its absurdity, the refusal to be bamboozled about mankind.

And because Rabelais' book was carried over into English by translators of genius who understood precisely what he was saying, he enriched the English language too and gave to English prose-writers (as we shall see particularly when we come to mention Sterne) a sense of the variety and potentiality of their medium. Rabelais' use of language is to a large extent poetic, that is to say words are used for their own associative values, and rhythms originate not simply from an attempt to record accurately the actual values of speech, but from an attempt to use, weight and give new significance to those values.

In Rabelais, then, we find a revolutionary impulse towards realism in a still essentially medieval man, but when, half a century later, in 1605, the first part of *Don Quixote* appeared, the revolt against medieval standards had become fully conscious. Cervantes' novel is sometimes regarded as essentially a burlesque. One might as well describe *Macbeth* as a play about witchcraft. Certainly Cervantes' purpose is to a high degree satirical—'the Fall and Destruction of that monstrous Heap of ill-contrived Romances, which, though abhorr'd by many, have so strangely infatuated the greater part of Mankind'—but romance is satirised not for its own sake but because it hinders the writer from telling the truth about life in all its aspects. To over-emphasise the negative side of *Don Quixote* is to reduce it to the stature of a *Cold Comfort Farm*; whereas Cervantes' tremendous achievement is that, quite apart from the intrinsic value of his own rich creation, he re-asserted in story-telling the tradition of the realistic epic.

The fantasy of romance carries away the reader in order that he need not face life, the fantasy of *Don Quixote* quickens his sense of life, involves him in a critical questioning of values and attitudes, imposes a pattern on experience which deepens its meaning. Cervantes knew quite well that the destruction of romance was a necessary act in the freeing of the world from the chains of feudalism. And he closes his book with the words:

As for me, I must esteem myself happy, to have been the first that render'd those fabulous, nonsensical stories of Knight-Errantry, the object of the public Aversion. They are already going down, and I do not doubt but they will drop and fall altogether in good Earnest, never to rise again. *Adieu.*

## PART II

### The Eighteenth Century