

THE RISE  
OF THE NOVEL

*Studies in Defoe, Richardson  
and Fielding*

*by*

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### *Realism and the Novel Form*

THERE are still no wholly satisfactory answers to many of the general questions which anyone interested in the early eighteenth-century novelists and their works is likely to ask: Is the novel a new literary form? And if we assume, as is commonly done, that it is, and that it was begun by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, how does it differ from the prose fiction of the past, from that of Greece, for example, or that of the Middle Ages, or of seventeenth-century France? And is there any reason why these differences appeared when and where they did?

Such large questions are never easy to approach, much less to answer, and they are particularly difficult in this case because Defoe, Richardson and Fielding do not in the usual sense constitute a literary school. Indeed their works show so little sign of mutual influence and are so different in nature that at first sight it appears that our curiosity about the rise of the novel is unlikely to find any satisfaction other than the meagre one afforded by the terms 'genius' and 'accident', the twin faces on the Janus of the dead ends of literary history. We cannot, of course, do without them: on the other hand there is not much we can do with them. The present inquiry therefore takes another direction: assuming that the appearance of our first three novelists within a single generation was probably not sheer accident, and that their geniuses could not have created the new form unless the conditions of the time had also been favourable, it attempts to discover what these favourable conditions in the literary and social situation were, and in what ways Defoe, Richardson and Fielding were its beneficiaries.

For this investigation our first need is a working definition of the characteristics of the novel—a definition sufficiently narrow to exclude previous types of narrative and yet broad enough to apply to whatever is usually put in the novel category. The novelists themselves do not help us very much here. It is true that both Richardson and Fielding saw themselves as founders of a new kind of writing, and that both viewed their work as

involving a break with the old-fashioned romances; but neither they nor their contemporaries provide us with the kind of characterisation of the new genre that we need; indeed they did not even canonise the changed nature of their fiction by a change in nomenclature—our usage of the term 'novel' was not fully established until the end of the eighteenth century.

With the help of their larger perspective the historians of the novel have been able to do much more to determine the idiosyncratic features of the new form. Briefly, they have seen 'realism' as the defining characteristic which differentiates the work of the early eighteenth-century novelists from previous fiction. With their picture—that of writers otherwise different but alike in this quality of 'realism'—one's initial reservation must surely be that the term itself needs further explanation, if only because to use it without qualification as a defining characteristic of the novel might otherwise carry the invidious suggestion that all previous writers and literary forms pursued the unreal.

The main critical associations of the term 'realism' are with the French school of Realists. 'Réalisme' was apparently first used as an aesthetic description in 1835 to denote the 'vérité humaine' of Rembrandt as opposed to the 'idéauté poétique' of neo-classical painting; it was later consecrated as a specifically literary term by the foundation in 1856 of *Réalisme*, a journal edited by Duranty.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately much of the usefulness of the word was soon lost in the bitter controversies over the 'low' subjects and allegedly immoral tendencies of Flaubert and his successors. As a result, 'realism' came to be used primarily as the antonym of 'idealism', and this sense, which is actually a reflection of the position taken by the enemies of the French Realists, has in fact coloured much critical and historical writing about the novel. The prehistory of the form has commonly been envisaged as a matter of tracing the continuity between all earlier fiction which portrayed low life: the story of the Ephesian matron is 'realistic' because it shows that sexual appetite is stronger than wifely sorrow; and the fabliau or the picaresque tale are 'realistic' because economic or carnal motives are given pride of place in their presentation of human behaviour. By the same implicit

<sup>1</sup> See Bernard Weinberg, *French Realism: the Critical Reaction 1830-1870* (London, 1937), p. 114.

premise, the English eighteenth-century novelists, together with Furetière, Scarron and Lesage in France, are regarded as the eventual climax of this tradition: the 'realism' of the novels of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding is closely associated with the fact that Moll Flanders is a thief, Pamela a hypocrite, and Tom Jones a fornicator.

This use of 'realism', however, has the grave defect of obscuring what is probably the most original feature of the novel form. If the novel were realistic merely because it saw life from the seamy side, it would only be an inverted romance; but in fact it surely attempts to portray all the varieties of human experience, and not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective: the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it.

This, of course, is very close to the position of the French Realists themselves, who asserted that if their novels tended to differ from the more flattering pictures of humanity presented by many established ethical, social, and literary codes, it was merely because they were the product of a more dispassionate and scientific scrutiny of life than had ever been attempted before. It is far from clear that this ideal of scientific objectivity is desirable, and it certainly cannot be realised in practice: nevertheless it is very significant that, in the first sustained effort of the new genre to become critically aware of its aims and methods, the French Realists should have drawn attention to an issue which the novel raises more sharply than any other literary form—the problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates. This is essentially an epistemological problem, and it therefore seems likely that the nature of the novel's realism, whether in the early eighteenth century or later, can best be clarified by the help of those professionally concerned with the analysis of concepts, the philosophers.

## I

By a paradox that will surprise only the neophyte, the term 'realism' in philosophy is most strictly applied to a view of reality diametrically opposed to that of common usage—to the view held by the scholastic Realists of the Middle Ages that it is universals, classes or abstractions, and not the particular, concrete objects of sense-perception, which are the true 'realities'.

This, at first sight, appears unhelpful, since in the novel, more than in any other genre, general truths only exist *post res*; but the very unfamiliarity of the point of view of scholastic Realism at least serves to draw attention to a characteristic of the novel which is analogous to the changed philosophical meaning of 'realism' today: the novel arose in the modern period, a period whose general intellectual orientation was most decisively separated from its classical and mediaeval heritage by its rejection—or at least its attempted rejection—of universals.<sup>1</sup>

Modern realism, of course, begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses: it has its origins in Descartes and Locke, and received its first full formulation by Thomas Reid in the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> But the view that the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it, obviously does not in itself throw much light on literary realism; since almost everyone, in all ages, has in one way or another been forced to some such conclusion about the external world by his own experience, literature has always been to some extent exposed to the same epistemological naïveté. Further, the distinctive tenets of realist epistemology, and the controversies associated with them, are for the most part much too specialised in nature to have much bearing on literature. What is important to the novel in philosophical realism is much less specific; it is rather the general temper of realist thought, the methods of investigation it has used, and the kinds of problems it has raised.

The general temper of philosophical realism has been critical, anti-traditional and innovating; its method has been the study of the particulars of experience by the individual investigator, who, ideally at least, is free from the body of past assumptions and traditional beliefs; and it has given a peculiar importance to semantics, to the problem of the nature of the correspondence between words and reality. All of these features of philosophical realism have analogies to distinctive features of the novel form, analogies which draw attention to the characteristic kind of correspondence between life and literature which has obtained in prose fiction since the novels of Defoe and Richardson.

<sup>1</sup> See R. I. Aaron, *The Theory of Universals* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 18-41.

<sup>2</sup> See S. Z. Hasan, *Realism* (Cambridge, 1928), chs. 1 and 2.

(a)

The greatness of Descartes was primarily one of method, of the thoroughness of his determination to accept nothing on trust; and his *Discourse on Method* (1637) and his *Meditations* did much to bring about the modern assumption whereby the pursuit of truth is conceived of as a wholly individual matter, logically independent of the tradition of past thought, and indeed as more likely to be arrived at by a departure from it.

The novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation. Previous literary forms had reflected the general tendency of their cultures to make conformity to traditional practice the major test of truth: the plots of classical and renaissance epic, for example, were based on past history or fable, and the merits of the author's treatment were judged largely according to a view of literary decorum derived from the accepted models in the genre. This literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience—individual experience which is always unique and therefore new. The novel is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture which, in the last few centuries, has set an unprecedented value on originality, on the novel; and it is therefore well named.

This emphasis on the new accounts for some of the critical difficulties which the novel is widely agreed to present. When we judge a work in another genre, a recognition of its literary models is often important and sometimes essential; our evaluation depends to a large extent on our analysis of the author's skill in handling the appropriate formal conventions. On the other hand, it is surely very damaging for a novel to be in any sense an imitation of another literary work: and the reason for this seems to be that since the novelist's primary task is to convey the impression of fidelity to human experience, attention to any pre-established formal conventions can only endanger his success. What is often felt as the formlessness of the novel, as compared, say, with tragedy or the ode, probably follows from this: the poverty of the novel's formal conventions would seem to be the price it must pay for its realism.

But the absence of formal conventions in the novel is unimportant compared to its rejection of traditional plots. Plot, of



reality; the prose immediately informs us that exploratory operations have long since been accomplished, that we are to be spared that labour, and presented instead with a sifted and clarified report of the findings.

There is a curious antinomy here. On the one hand, Defoe and Richardson make an uncompromising application of the realist point of view in language and prose structure, and thereby forfeit other literary values. On the other hand, Fielding's stylistic virtues tend to interfere with his technique as a novelist, because a patent selectiveness of vision destroys our belief in the reality of report, or at least diverts our attention from the content of the report to the skill of the reporter. There would seem to be some inherent contradiction between the ancient and abiding literary values and the distinctive narrative technique of the novel.

That this may be so is suggested by a parallel with French fiction. In France, the classical critical outlook, with its emphasis on elegance and concision, was not fully challenged until the coming of Romanticism. It is perhaps partly for this reason that French fiction from *La Princesse de Clèves* to *Les Liaisons dangereuses* stands outside the main tradition of the novel. For all its psychological penetration and literary skill, we feel it is too stylish to be authentic. In this Madame de La Fayette and Choderlos de Laclos are the polar opposites of Defoe and Richardson, whose very diffuseness tends to act as a guarantee of the authenticity of their report, whose prose aims exclusively at what Locke defined as the proper purpose of language, 'to convey the knowledge of things',<sup>1</sup> and whose novels as a whole pretend to be no more than a transcription of real life—in Flaubert's words, 'le réel écrit'.

It would appear, then, that the function of language is much more largely referential in the novel than in other literary forms; that the genre itself works by exhaustive presentation rather than by elegant concentration. This fact would no doubt explain both why the novel is the most translatable of the genres; why many undoubtedly great novelists, from Richardson and Balzac to Hardy and Dostoevsky, often write gracelessly, and sometimes with downright vulgarity; and why the novel has less need of historical and literary commentary than other genres—its formal convention forces it to supply its own footnotes.

<sup>1</sup> *Human Understanding*, Bk. III, ch. 10, sect. xxiii.

## II

So much for the main analogies between realism in philosophy and literature. They are not proposed as exact; philosophy is one thing and literature is another. Nor do the analogies depend in any way on the presumption that the realist tradition in philosophy was a cause of the realism of the novel. That there was some influence is very likely, especially through Locke, whose thought everywhere pervades the eighteenth-century climate of opinion. But if a causal relationship of any importance exists it is probably much less direct: both the philosophical and the literary innovations must be seen as parallel manifestations of larger change—that vast transformation of Western civilisation since the Renaissance which has replaced the unified world picture of the Middle Ages with another very different one—one which presents us, essentially, with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places.

Here, however, we are concerned with a much more limited conception, with the extent to which the analogy with philosophical realism helps to isolate and define the distinctive narrative mode of the novel. This, it has been suggested, is the sum of literary techniques whereby the novel's imitation of human life follows the procedures adopted by philosophical realism in its attempt to ascertain and report the truth. These procedures are by no means confined to philosophy; they tend, in fact, to be followed whenever the relation to reality of any report of an event is being investigated. The novel's mode of imitating reality may therefore be equally well summarised in terms of the procedures of another group of specialists in epistemology, the jury in a court of law. Their expectations, and those of the novel reader coincide in many ways: both want to know 'all the particulars' of a given case—the time and place of the occurrence; both must be satisfied as to the identities of the parties concerned, and will refuse to accept evidence about anyone called Sir Toby Belch or Mr. Badman—still less about a Chloe who has no surname and is 'common as the air'; and they also expect the witnesses to tell the story 'in his own words'. The jury, in fact, takes the 'circumstantial view of life', which T. H. Green<sup>1</sup> found to be the characteristic outlook of the novel.

<sup>1</sup> 'Estimate', *Works*, III, 37.

The narrative method whereby the novel embodies this circumstantial view of life may be called its formal realism; formal, because the term realism does not here refer to any special literary doctrine or purpose, but only to a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel, and so rarely in other literary genres, that they may be regarded as typical of the form itself. Formal realism, in fact, is the narrative embodiment of a premise that Defoe and Richardson accepted very literally, but which is implicit in the novel form in general: the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms.

Formal realism is, of course, like the rules of evidence, only a convention; and there is no reason why the report on human life which is presented by it should be in fact any truer than those presented through the very different conventions of other literary genres. The novel's air of total authenticity, indeed, does tend to authorise confusion on this point: and the tendency of some Realists and Naturalists to forget that the accurate transcription of actuality does not necessarily produce a work of any real truth or enduring literary value is no doubt partly responsible for the rather widespread distaste for Realism and all its works which is current today. This distaste, however, may also promote critical confusion by leading us into the opposite error; we must not allow an awareness of certain shortcomings in the aims of the Realist school to obscure the very considerable extent to which the novel in general, as much in Joyce as in Zola, employs the literary means here called formal realism. Nor must we forget that, although formal realism is only a convention, it has, like all literary conventions, its own peculiar advantages. There are important differences in the degree to which different literary forms imitate reality; and the formal realism of the novel allows a more immediate imitation of individual experience set in its temporal and spatial environment than do other literary forms. Consequently the novel's conventions make much smaller demands on the audience than do most literary conventions; and this surely explains why the

majority of readers in the last two hundred years have found in the novel the literary form which most closely satisfies their wishes for a close correspondence between life and art. Nor are the advantages of the close and detailed correspondence to real life offered by formal realism limited to assisting the novel's popularity; they are also related to its most distinctive literary qualities, as we shall see.

In the strictest sense, of course, formal realism was not discovered by Defoe and Richardson; they only applied it much more completely than had been done before. Homer, for example, as Carlyle pointed out,<sup>1</sup> shared with them that outstanding 'clearness of sight' which is manifested in the 'detailed, ample and lovingly exact' descriptions that abound in their works; and there are many passages in later fiction, from *The Golden Ass* to *Aucassin and Nicolette*, from Chaucer to Bunyan, where the characters, their actions and their environment are presented with a particularity as authentic as that in any eighteenth-century novel. But there is an important difference: in Homer and in earlier prose fiction these passages are relatively rare, and tend to stand out from the surrounding narrative; the total literary structure was not consistently oriented in the direction of formal realism, and the plot especially, which was usually traditional and often highly improbable, was in direct conflict with its premises. Even when previous writers had overtly professed a wholly realistic aim, as did many seventeenth-century writers, they did not pursue it wholeheartedly. La Calprenède, Richard Head, Grimmelshausen, Bunyan, Aphra Behn, Furetière,<sup>2</sup> to mention only a few, had all asserted that their fictions were literally true; but their prefatory asseverations are no more convincing than the very similar ones to be found in most works of mediaeval hagiography. The aim of verisimilitude had not been deeply enough assimilated in either case to bring about the full rejection of all the non-realistic conventions that governed the genre.

For reasons to be considered in the next chapter, Defoe and Richardson were unprecedentedly independent of the literary conventions which might have interfered with their primary intentions, and they accepted the requirements of literal truth

<sup>1</sup> 'Burns', *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (New York, 1899), I, 276-277.

<sup>2</sup> See A. J. Tiejé, 'A Peculiar Phase of the Theory of Realism in Pre-Richardsonian Prose-Fiction', *PMLA*, XXVII (1913), 213-252.

much more comprehensively. Of no fiction before Defoe's could Lamb have written, in terms very similar to those which Hazlitt used of Richardson,<sup>1</sup> 'It is like reading evidence in a court of Justice'.<sup>2</sup> Whether that is in itself a good thing is open to question; Defoe and Richardson would hardly deserve their reputation unless they had other and better claims on our attention. Nevertheless there can be little doubt that the development of a narrative method capable of creating such an impression is the most conspicuous manifestation of that mutation of prose fiction which we call the novel; the historical importance of Defoe and Richardson therefore primarily depends on the suddenness and completeness with which they brought into being what may be regarded as the lowest common denominator of the novel genre as a whole, its formal realism.

<sup>1</sup> 'He sets about describing every object and transaction, as if the whole had been given in on evidence by an eye-witness' (*Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (New York, 1845), p. 138).

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Walter Wilson, Dec. 16, 1822, printed in the latter's *Memoirs of the Life and Times of Daniel de Foe* (London, 1830, III, 428).

*The Reading Public and the  
Rise of the Novel*

THE novel's formal realism, we have seen, involved a many-sided break with the current literary tradition. Among the many reasons which made it possible for that break to occur earlier and more thoroughly in England than elsewhere, considerable importance must certainly be attached to changes in the eighteenth-century reading public. In his *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century*, for example, Leslie Stephen long ago suggested that 'the gradual extension of the reading class affected the development of the literature addressed to them',<sup>1</sup> and he pointed to the rise of the novel, together with that of journalism, as prime examples of the effect of changes in the audience for literature. The nature of the evidence is such, however, that a reasonably full analysis would be inordinately long and yet fall far short of completeness in some important matters where information is scanty and difficult to interpret: what is offered here, therefore, is only a brief and tentative treatment of a few of the possible connections between changes in the nature and organisation of the reading public, and the emergence of the novel.

## I

Many eighteenth-century observers thought that their age was one of remarkable and increasing popular interest in reading. On the other hand, it is probable that although the reading public was large by comparison with previous periods, it was still very far from the mass reading public of today. The most convincing evidence of this is statistical, although it must, of course, be remembered that all the numerical estimates available are, to varying but always considerable degrees, both untrustworthy in themselves and problematic in their application.

<sup>1</sup> London, 1904, p. 26. See also Helen Sard Hughes, 'The Middle Class Reader and the English Novel', *JEGP*, XXV (1926), 362-378.





## CHAPTER X

*Realism and the Later Tradition: a Note*

AFTER Richardson and Fielding the novel played a part of increasing importance in the literary scene. The annual production of works of fiction, which had averaged only about seven in the years between 1700 and 1740, rose to an average of about twenty in the three decades following 1740, and this output was doubled in the period from 1770 to 1800.<sup>1</sup> The quantitative increase, however, was not in any way matched by an increase in quality. With only a few exceptions the fiction of the last half of the eighteenth century, though occasionally of some interest as evidence of the life of the time or of various fugitive literary tendencies such as sentimentalism or Gothic terror, had little intrinsic merit; and much of it reveals only too plainly the pressures towards literary degradation which were exerted by the booksellers and circulating library operators in their efforts to meet the reading public's uncritical demand for easy vicarious indulgence in sentiment and romance.

There were, however, several novelists who rose above the level of mediocrity and worse, novelists such as Smollett, Sterne and Fanny Burney. Smollett has many merits as a social reporter and as a humorist, but the manifest flaws in the central situations and the general structure of all his novels except *Humphrey Clinker* (1771) prevent him from playing a very important role in the main tradition of the novel. Sterne is a very different matter, and although his remarkable literary originality gives his work a wholly personal, not to say eccentric, quality, his only novel, *Tristram Shandy* (1760-1767), offers very provocative solutions of the major formal problems which had been raised by his predecessors; for, on the one hand, Sterne found a way of reconciling Richardson's realism of presentation with Fielding's

<sup>1</sup> These figures, presented with the greatest possible reserve, were compiled from A. W. Smith, 'Collections and Notes of Prose Fiction in England, 1660-1714', *Harvard Summaries of Dissertations*, pp. 281-284, 1932; Charlotte E. Morgan, *The Rise of the Novel of Manners, 1600-1740* (New York, 1911), p. 54; Godfrey Frank Singer, *The Epistolary Novel* (Philadelphia, 1933), pp. 99-100; Andrew Block, *The English Novel, 1740-1850, a Catalogue . . .* (London, 1939).

realism of assessment, while, on the other, he showed that there was no necessary antagonism between their respective internal and external approaches to character.

Sterne's narrative mode gives very careful attention to all the aspects of formal realism: to the particularisation of time, place and person; to a natural and lifelike sequence of action; and to the creation of a literary style which gives the most exact verbal and rhythmical equivalent possible of the object described. As a result, many of the scenes in *Tristram Shandy* achieve a living authenticity that combines Defoe's brilliant economy of suggestion with Richardson's more minutely discriminated presentation of the momentary thoughts, feelings and gestures of his characters. So assured, indeed, is this mastery of realistic presentation that, had it been applied to the usual purposes of the novel, Sterne would probably have been the supreme figure among eighteenth-century novelists. But, of course, *Tristram Shandy* is not so much a novel as a parody of a novel, and, with a precocious technical maturity, Sterne turns his irony against many of the narrative methods which the new genre had so lately developed.

This ironical tendency is particularly focussed on the hero himself. Pursuing the naming-convention of formal realism, Sterne tells us exactly how his character was named, and how this alone is a symbol of its bearer's unhappy destiny; and yet, of course, poor Tristram remains an elusive figure, perhaps because philosophy has taught him that personal identity is not so simple a question as is commonly assumed: when the commissary asks him '—And who are you?', he can only reply, 'Don't puzzle me',<sup>1</sup> thereby resuming the tenor of Hume's sceptical thoughts on the subject in the *Treatise of Human Nature*.<sup>2</sup> But the main reason why Sterne's hero continues to escape us is that his author plays fast and loose with what is probably the most basic of the problems of formal realism, the treatment of the time dimension in narrative.

The primary temporal sequence of *Tristram Shandy* is based—again in accord with the recent tendencies in the philosophy of the time—on the flow of associations in the consciousness of the narrator. Since everything that occurs in the mind occurs in the present, this enables Sterne to portray some of his scenes with all the vividness which Richardson's 'lively present-tense

<sup>1</sup> Bk. I, ch. 9; Bk. VII, ch. 33.

<sup>2</sup> See Bk. I, pt. 4, sect. vi.

manner' had made possible; at the same time, since Tristram Shandy is recounting the story of his own 'life and opinions', Sterne can also command the longer temporal perspectives of Defoe's autobiographical memoir; while, in addition, he adopts Fielding's innovation in the treatment of time by correlating his fictional actions with an external time-scheme—the chronology of the history of the Shandy household is consistent with the dates of such historical events as Uncle Toby's battles in Flanders.<sup>1</sup>

Sterne, however, is not satisfied with this skilful handling of the time problem, and proceeds to take to its logical extreme the ultimate realist premise of a one-to-one correspondence between literature and reality. He proposes to make an absolute temporal equivalent between his novel and his reader's experience of it by providing an hour's reading matter for every hour in his hero's waking life. But this, of course, is a forlorn enterprise, since it will always take Tristram much more than an hour to write down an account of an hour of his own experience, and so the more he writes and the more we read, the more our common objective recedes.

Thus Sterne, largely by taking the temporal requirements of formal realism more literally than had ever been attempted before—or since—achieves a *reductio ad absurdum* of the novel form itself. At the same time, however, this sly subversion of the proper purposes of the novel has recently bestowed upon *Tristram Shandy* a certain posthumous topicality. Sterne's very flexible handling of the time-scheme of his novel prefigures the break with the tyranny of chronological order in the conduct of narrative which was made by Proust, Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and Sterne therefore found renewed critical favour in the 'twenties as a precursor of the moderns. Nor is this all: the greatest contemporary exponent of philosophical realism, Bertrand Russell, modelled his own statement of the problematic nature of time on *Tristram Shandy* and named his paradox after Sterne's infinitely regressive hero.<sup>2</sup>

Sterne's handling of the temporal dimension in *Tristram Shandy* is of crucial importance in yet another context, since it provides the technical basis for his combination of realism of

presentation with realism of assessment. Sterne, like Fielding, was a scholar and a wit, and he was equally anxious to have full freedom to comment on the action of his novel or indeed on anything else. But whereas Fielding had gained this freedom only by impairing the verisimilitude of his narrative, Sterne was able to achieve exactly the same ends without any such sacrifice by the simple but ingenious expedient of locating his reflections in the mind of his hero—the most recondite allusion could thus be laid at the door of the notorious inconsequences of the processes of the association of ideas.

Fielding's realism of assessment did not operate only through direct commentary; his evaluations were also made explicit by organising the narrative sequence into a significant counterpoint of scenes which usually reflected ironically upon each other, although often at the cost of giving the reader a sense of somewhat obtrusive manipulation. Sterne, however, can manipulate until we are giddy without any breach of narrative authenticity, since every transition is part of the hero's mental life which, of course, is very little concerned with chronological order. As a result Sterne is able to arrange the elements of his novel into whatever sequence he pleases, without the arbitrary changes of setting and characters which such a counterpoint would involve in Fielding.

This freedom, however, Sterne treats in exactly the same way as he treats his freedom in the use of the time dimension, and as a result his novel's principle of organisation eventually ceases to be narrative in the ordinary sense. The ultimate implications of Sterne's mastery of the technique for achieving realism of assessment without compromising authenticity are therefore largely negative; but even here, of course, objection is impossible within Sterne's fictional terms, since, although we may be entitled to expect some degree of order in an author, it would hardly be reasonable to expect it from the workings of the mind of Tristram Shandy.

Sterne's narrative methods in general, then, bear a more central relationship to the main traditions of the novel than at first appears; we may feel that he has undermined the methods of Richardson and Fielding rather than reconciled them, but there can at least be no doubt that he is working within the narrative directions which they originated. This continuity in *Tristram Shandy* also extends to subject-matter and to methods

<sup>1</sup> See Theodore Baird, 'The Time Scheme of *Tristram Shandy* and a Source', *PMLA*, LI (1936), 803-820.

<sup>2</sup> *Principles of Mathematics* (London, 1937), pp. 358-360.

of characterisation, although in equally paradoxical ways. One of Sterne's major themes, for example, is very similar to Richardson's central preoccupation: Uncle Toby is as much an embodiment of the eighteenth-century conception of ideal goodness as Clarissa, but at the same time Fielding's criticism of Richardson is implicit in the way that Sterne's masculine embodiment of sexual virtue is pitted against the Widow Wadman's villainous Lovelace. In characterisation, also, *Tristram Shandy* shows a very personal combination of the distinctive emphases of Richardson and Fielding. On the surface it would seem that since the hero's consciousness is the locus of the action, Sterne must be classed as an extreme exponent of the internal and subjective approach to character, an approach, of course, which normally accompanies minute particularity in narrative method. Actually, however, although the behaviour of the main persons of the story is often rendered with a studied attention to every inflection of thought and act, they themselves are fundamentally conceived as general social and psychological types, much in Fielding's manner.

*Tristram Shandy*, then, suggests that just as the author's freedom to suggest an evaluation of the picture of life which his novel presents need not detract from its appearance of authenticity, so there is no absolute dichotomy between the internal and the external approach to character. This issue is of considerable general importance, since the tendency to make an absolute separation between 'characters of nature' and 'characters of manners' is the eighteenth-century form of a later tendency to equate 'realism' in the novel with an emphasis on society rather than the individual, and to regard those novelists who explore the inner lives of their characters as outside the main realist tradition. That this distinction in the approach to character is an important one cannot be denied, and it is understandable that the literary perspective of the French Realists should so have coloured our sense of the term that we feel that if Balzac is a 'realist' Proust needs some other word to describe him. Nevertheless the basic continuity of the tradition of the novel is made clearer if we remember that these differences in narrative method are differences of emphasis rather than of kind, and that they exist within a common allegiance to the formal or presentational realism which, it has been argued above, is typical of the novel genre as a whole.

This particular critical problem has a close epistemological analogue—dualism. It is significant that it was Descartes, the founder of modern philosophical realism, who raised the dualist issue and made it one of the characteristic preoccupations of the thought of the last three centuries. The two philosophical problems, of course, are closely related, since the epistemological bent of seventeenth-century philosophy naturally tended to focus attention on the problem of how the individual mind can know anything that is external to itself. But although dualism dramatises the opposition between different ways of looking at reality it does not, in fact, lead to any complete rejection of the reality either of the ego or of the external world. Similarly, although different novelists have given different degrees of importance to the internal and the external objects of consciousness, they have never completely rejected either; on the contrary, the basic terms of their inquiry have been dictated by the narrative equivalent of dualism—the problematic nature of the relation between the individual and his environment.

Defoe would seem to occupy a very central position between the subjective and the external orientations of the novelist: the individual ego and the material world, as the result of Defoe's use of formal realism, are both given a greater reality in his novels than in previous fiction. Indeed the fact that his narrative point of view, that of the autobiographical memoir, shows itself to be so well suited to reflect the tension between the inner and the outer world, suggests that the Cartesian shift to the point of view of the perceiving individual ego was itself calculated to make possible a more sharply defined picture of the outer as well as of the inner world.

Later novelists, of course, have exhibited very divergent approaches to this duality, but it is significant that even those who, from Richardson onwards, have laid the greatest stress on the subjective and psychological direction, have also made some of the greatest contributions both to the development of the possibilities of formal realism and to the portrayal of society. Proust, for example, gives us, among other things, a document of Cartesian introspection; but it is an introspection which reveals the external world of the Third Republic as tellingly as the internal world of the memories of the narrator. Henry James's technical triumphs can be seen as the result of an ingenious manipulation of the two dualist extremes: in the later novels

original text independent of the external world

the reader is absorbed into the subjective consciousness of one or more of the characters, and from that artfully selected point of disadvantage beholds obliquely and ironically unfolded the vision of the external social facts, the furies of money, class and culture which are the ultimate determinants of subjective experience although hardly glimpsed by their human agents and only fully recognised by the reader when the story is done. Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is in so many ways the climax of the novel's development, is certainly its climax in the treatment of the dualist extremes: in its last two books the graphic presentation of Molly Bloom's daydream and the cataloguing of the contents of her husband's drawers are defiantly unadulterated examples of the adjustment of narrative manner to the subjective and the objective poles of dualism.

The example of Sterne, then, and the analogy of philosophical dualism, tend to support the view that the two major differences of narrative method between the novels of Richardson and Fielding are by no means manifestations of two opposite and irreconcilable kinds of novel, but merely rather clearly contrasted solutions of problems which pervade the whole tradition of the novel and whose apparent divergencies can in fact be harmoniously reconciled. Indeed, the full maturity of the genre itself, it can be argued, could only come when this reconciliation had been achieved, and it is probable that it is largely to her successful resolution of these problems that Jane Austen owes her eminence in the tradition of the English novel.

In this as in much else Jane Austen was the heir of Fanny Burney, herself no inconsiderable figure in bringing together the divergent directions which the geniuses of Richardson and Fielding had imposed upon the novel. Both women novelists followed Richardson—the Richardson of the less intense domestic conflicts of *Sir Charles Grandison*—in their minute presentation of daily life. At the same time Fanny Burney and Jane Austen followed Fielding in adopting a more detached attitude to their narrative material, and in evaluating it from a comic and objective point of view. It is here that Jane Austen's technical genius manifests itself. She dispensed with the participating narrator, whether as the author of a memoir as in Defoe, or as letter-writer as in Richardson, probably because both of these roles make freedom to comment and evaluate more difficult to

arrange; instead she told her stories after Fielding's manner, as a confessed author. Jane Austen's variant of the commenting narrator, however, was so much more discreet that it did not substantially affect the authenticity of her narrative. Her analyses of her characters and their states of mind, and her ironical juxtapositions of motive and situation are as pointed as anything in Fielding, but they do not seem to come from an intrusive author but rather from some august and impersonal spirit of social and psychological understanding.

At the same time, Jane Austen varied her narrative point of view sufficiently to give us, not only editorial comment, but much of Defoe's and Richardson's psychological closeness to the subjective world of the characters. In her novels there is usually one character whose consciousness is tacitly accorded a privileged status, and whose mental life is rendered more completely than that of the other characters. In *Pride and Prejudice* (published 1813), for example, the story is told substantially from the point of view of Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine; but the identification is always qualified by the other role of the narrator acting as dispassionate analyst, and as a result the reader does not lose his critical awareness of the novel as a whole. The same strategy as regards point of view is employed with supreme brilliance in *Emma* (1816), a novel which combines Fielding's characteristic strength in conveying the sense of society as a whole, with something of Henry James's capacity for locating the essential structural continuity of his novel in the reader's growing awareness of the full complexity of the personality and situation of the character through whom the story is mainly told: the unfolding of Emma Woodhouse's inner being has much of the drama of progressive revelation with which James presents Maisie Farange or Lambert Strether.

Jane Austen's novels, in short, must be seen as the most successful solutions of the two general narrative problems for which Richardson and Fielding had provided only partial answers. She was able to combine into a harmonious unity the advantages both of realism of presentation and realism of assessment, of the internal and of the external approaches to character; her novels have authenticity without diffuseness or trickery, wisdom of social comment without a garrulous essayist, and a sense of the social order which is not achieved at the expense of the individuality and autonomy of the characters.

Jane Austen's novels are also the climax of many other aspects of the eighteenth-century novel. In their subjects, despite some obvious differences, they continue many of the characteristic interests of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. Jane Austen faces more squarely than Defoe, for example, the social and moral problems raised by economic individualism and the middle-class quest for improved status; she follows Richardson in basing her novels on marriage and especially on the proper feminine role in the matter; and her ultimate picture of the proper norms of the social system is similar to that of Fielding although its application to the characters and their situation is in general more serious and discriminating.

Jane Austen's novels are also representative in another sense; they reflect the process whereby, as we have seen, women were playing an increasingly important part in the literary scene.

The majority of eighteenth-century novels were actually written by women, but this had long remained a purely quantitative assertion of dominance; it was Jane Austen who completed the work that Fanny Burney had begun, and challenged masculine prerogative in a much more important matter. Her example suggests that the feminine sensibility was in some ways better equipped to reveal the intricacies of personal relationships and was therefore at a real advantage in the realm of the novel. The reasons for the greater feminine command of the area of personal relationships would be difficult and lengthy to detail; one of the main ones is probably that suggested by John Stuart Mill's statement that 'all the education that women receive from society inculcates in them the feeling that the individuals connected with them are the only ones to whom they owe any duty'.<sup>1</sup> As to the connection of this with the novel, there can surely be little doubt. Henry James, for example, alluded to it in a tribute which is characteristic in its scrupulous moderation:

Women are delicate and patient observers; they hold their noses close, as it were, to the texture of life. They feel and perceive the real with a kind of personal tact, and their observations are recorded in a thousand delightful volumes.<sup>2</sup> More generally, James elsewhere linked the 'immensely great con-

<sup>1</sup> *The Subjection of Women* (London, 1924), p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> 'Anthony Trollope', *Partial Portraits* (London, 1888), p. 50. One comparative study of conversations showed that 37 per cent of women's conversations were about persons as against 16 per cent of men's (M. H. Landis and H. E. Burt, 'A Study of Conversations', *J. Comp. Psychology*, IV (1924), 81-89).

spicuity of the novel' in modern civilisation to the 'immensely great conspicuity of the attitude of women'.<sup>1</sup>

In Jane Austen, Fanny Burney and George Eliot the advantages of the feminine point of view outweigh the restrictions of social horizon which have until recently been associated with it. At the same time it is surely true that the dominance of women readers in the public for the novel is connected with the characteristic kind of weakness and unreality to which the form is liable—its tendency to restrict the field on which its psychological and intellectual discriminations operate to a small and arbitrary selection of human situations, a restriction which, since Fielding, has affected all but a very few English novels with a certain narrowing of the framework of experience and permitted attitude.

There is, then, a real continuity both in narrative method and in social background between the early eighteenth-century novelists and their major successors. As a result, although one cannot properly speak of a school of eighteenth-century novelists, one can, by adopting a larger perspective and comparing them either with any previous writers of fiction or with their contemporaries abroad, see that they constitute a literary movement whose members had a good deal in common. This kinship was very evident to the early nineteenth-century critics of the novel: Hazlitt, for example, tended to see Richardson, Fielding and Sterne as alike in their unprecedented fidelity to 'human nature as it is'.<sup>2</sup> The family resemblance was seen even more clearly abroad. In France, as George Saintsbury pointed out, the relation between literature and life in fiction remained much more distant and formal throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Consequently English pre-eminence in the genre was freely granted from the middle of the century onwards, with Fielding, Sterne and, above all, Richardson as the major figures: Diderot even expressed a wish that some new name could be found to distinguish the novels of Richardson from the 'romans' of his native tradition;<sup>4</sup> and for many French and German readers the great differences between Richardson and

<sup>1</sup> 'Mrs. Humphry Ward', *Essays in London* (London, 1893), p. 265.

<sup>2</sup> See Charles I. Patterson, 'William Hazlitt as a Critic of Prose Fiction', *PMLA*, LXVIII (1953), 1010.

<sup>3</sup> *History of the French Novel* (London, 1917), I, 469.

<sup>4</sup> *Œuvres*, ed. Billy, p. 1089.

Fielding, for example, were of minor importance compared with the fact that both were much more realistic than their foreign counterparts.<sup>1</sup>

French testimony to the supremacy of the English novel in the eighteenth century was accompanied by explanations of the phenomenon which were in substantial agreement with the connections suggested above between social change and the rise of the new form. Thus the first important study of the novel in its larger social background, Madame de Staël's *De la littérature, considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1800), anticipated many of the elements of the present analysis;<sup>2</sup> while de Bonald, who seems to have been the first critic to use the formula 'La littérature est l'expression de la société', presented a substantially similar picture of the historical causes of the accepted English eminence in the novel in his *Du style et de la littérature* (1806). He took it for granted that the novel was essentially concerned with private and domestic life: what could be more natural, therefore, than that a distinctively commercial, bourgeois and urban society which laid so much stress on family life, and which was, moreover, so notoriously poor in the nobler forms of literary expression, should have triumphed in a familiar and domestic genre.<sup>3</sup>

The course of French literature provides confirmation of another kind as to the importance both of the social and the literary factors whose connection with the early development of the novel in England has been presented here. The first great efflorescence of the genre in France which began with Balzac and Stendhal occurred only after the French Revolution had placed the French middle class in a position of social and literary power which their English counterparts had achieved exactly a century before in the Glorious Revolution of 1689. And if Balzac and Stendhal are greater figures in the tradition of the European novel than any English novelist of the eighteenth century, it is surely in part due to the historical advantages which they enjoyed: not only because the social changes with which they were concerned had found much more dramatic expression than in England, but because, on the literary side, they

were the beneficiaries, not only of their English predecessors, but of a critical climate which was much more favourable to the development of formal realism than was that of neo-classicism.

It has been part of the present argument that the novel is more intimately related to the general literary and intellectual situation than is always remembered, and the close connection of the first great French Realists with Romanticism is an example of this. Romanticism, of course, was characterised by the emphasis on individualism and on originality which had found its first literary expression in the novel: and many romantic writers expressed themselves with particular vigour against those elements in classical critical theory which were inimical to formal realism. In the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), for example, Wordsworth proclaimed that the writer must 'keep his eye on the object' and present the experiences of common life in 'the real language of men'; while the French break with the literary past found its most dramatic expression with the presentation of *Hernani* (1830) where Victor Hugo defied the hallowed decorums which restricted the manner in which the literary object was supposed to be portrayed.

Such are some of the larger literary perspectives which the early eighteenth-century novelists suggest. Compared with Jane Austen, or with Balzac and Stendhal, Defoe, Richardson and Fielding all have fairly obvious technical weaknesses. Historically, however, they have two kinds of importance: the obvious importance that attaches to writers who made the major contribution to the creation of the dominant literary form of the last two centuries; and the equally great importance which arises from the fact that, assisted, no doubt, by the fact that they were essentially independent innovators, their novels provide three rather sharply defined images of the form in general, and constitute a remarkably complete recapitulation of the essential diversities in its later tradition. They also, of course, make a more absolute claim upon us. In the novel, more perhaps than in any other literary genre, the qualities of life can atone for the defects of art: and there can be little doubt that Defoe, Richardson and Fielding all earned themselves a more secure literary immortality than many later novelists who were possessed of much greater technical sophistication, by expressing their own sense of life with a completeness and conviction which is very rare, and for which one is grateful.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, L. M. Price, *English Literature in Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1953), p. 180.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Part I, ch. 15: 'De l'imagination des Anglais dans leurs poésies et leurs romans'.

<sup>3</sup> *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, 1864), III, col. 1000.