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THE ENGLISH NOVEL

AN INTRODUCTION

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PREFACE

This book is intended as an introduction to the English novel for students, but also for any general readers who might find the subject interesting. Though it occasionally considers particular novels in some detail, it is designed largely to offer ideas about a writer's work as a whole, which a reader may then bring to bear on individual texts. I have tried to tread a precarious line between bamboozling readers and talking down to them; and though some parts of it may be more intelligible to a beginner than others, I hope that what difficulties there may be belong, so to speak, to the subject matter rather than to the presentation.

I must apologize for confining myself so high-mindedly to the literary canon, but this was determined by the need to discuss authors whom students are at present most likely to encounter in their work. It should not, needless to say, be taken to imply that only those English novelists presented between these covers are worth reading.

T.E.

WHAT IS A NOVEL?

A novel is a piece of prose fiction of a reasonable length. Even a definition as toothless as this, however, is still too restricted. Not all novels are writtten in prose. There are novels in verse, like Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* or Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*. As for fiction, the distinction between fiction and fact is not always clear. And what counts as a reasonable length? At what point does a novella or long short story become a novel? André Gide's *The Immoralist* is usually described as a novel, and Anton Chekhov's 'The Duel' as a short story, but they are both about the same length.

The truth is that the novel is a genre which resists exact definition. This in itself is not particularly striking, since many things – 'game', for example, or 'hairy' – resist exact definition. It is hard to say how ape-like you have to be in order to qualify as hairy. The point about the novel, however, is not just that it eludes definitions, but that it actively undermines them. It is less a genre than an anti-genre. It cannibalizes other literary modes and mixes the bits and pieces promiscuously together. You can find poetry and dramatic dialogue in the novel, along with epic, pastoral, satire, history, elegy, tragedy and any number of other literary modes. Virginia Woolf described it as 'this most pliable of all forms'. The novel quotes, parodies and transforms other genres, converting its literary ancestors into mere components of itself in a kind of Oedipal vengeance on them. It is the queen of literary genres in a rather less elevated sense of the word than one might hear around Buckingham Palace.

The novel is a mighty melting pot, a mongrel among literary thoroughbreds. There seems to be nothing it cannot do. It can investigate a single human consciousness for eight hundred pages. Or it can recount the adventures of an onion, chart the history of a family over six generations, or recreate the Napoleonic wars. If it is a form particularly associated with the middle class, it is partly because the ideology of that class centres on a dream of total freedom from restraint. In a world in which God is dead, everything, so Dostoevsky remarked, is permitted; and the same goes for a world in which the old autocratic order is dead and the middle class reigns triumphant. The novel is an anarchic genre, since its rule is not to have rules. An anarchist is not just someone who breaks rules, but someone who breaks rules as a rule, and this is what the novel does too. Myths are cyclical and repetitive, while the novel appears excitingly unpredictable. In fact, the novel has a finite repertoire of forms and motifs. But it is an extraordinarily capacious one even so.

Because it is hard to say what a novel is, it is hard to say when the form first arose. Several authors have been proposed as plausible candidates for the first novelist, among them Miguel de Cervantes and Daniel Defoe; but the game of identifying origins is always a dangerous one. If a lecturer proclaims that the paper-clip was invented in 1905, someone at the back of the hall will always rise to announce that one has just been unearthed from an ancient Etruscan burial site. The Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin traces the novel back to imperial Rome and ancient Hellenistic romance, while Margaret Anne Doody in *The True Story of the Novel* likewise locates its birthplace in the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean.[1] It is true that if your definition of an automobile is fuzzy enough, it is not hard to trace the BMW back to the ancient Roman chariot. (This may also help to explain why so many premature obituary notices of the novel have been issued. What they usually indicate is that one *kind* of novel has died, while another has come into existence.) Even

so, something like the novel can indeed be found in ancient times. In the modern era, as v it has been linked with the emergence of the middle class, but when exactly was that? So would locate it as early as the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.

Most commentators agree that the novel has its roots in the literary form we know as romance. Indeed, these are roots that it has never entirely cut. Novels are romances – but romances which have to negotiate the prosaic world of modern civilization. They retain their romantic heroes and villains, wish-fulfilments and fairy-tale endings, but now these things have to be worked out in terms of sex and property, money and marriage, social mobility and the nuclear family. Sex and property, one might claim, are the themes of the modern novel from start to finish. So the English novel from Defoe to Woolf is still a kind of romance. In fact, nothing less than the magical devices of romance will do if, like the Victorian novelist, you are going to conjure a happy ending from the refractory problems of the modern world. In the Brontës, George Eliot, Hardy and Henry James, you can find vestiges of 'premodern' forms such as myth, fable, folk-tale and romance, mixed in with 'modern' ones like realism, reportage, psychological investigation and the like. If the novel is a romance, however, it is a disenchanted one, which has nothing to learn about baffled desires and recalcitrant realities.

Romance is full of marvels, whereas the modern novel is nothing if not mundane. It portrays a secular, empirical world rather than a mythical or metaphysical one. Its focus is on culture, not Nature or the supernatural. It is wary of the abstract and eternal, and believes in what it can touch, taste and handle. It may still retain some religious beliefs, but it is as nervous of religious debate as a pub landlord. The novel presents us with a changing, concrete, open-ended history rather than a closed symbolic universe. Time and narrative are of its essence. In the modern era, fewer and fewer things are immutable, and every phenomenon, including the self, seems historical to its roots. The novel is the form in which history goes all the way down.

All this is very different from romance, as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* makes clear. *Don Quixote*, sometimes mistakenly called the first novel, is in fact less the origin of the genre than a novel *about* the origin of the novel. It is thus a peculiarly narcissistic piece of writing, a fact which becomes comically obvious when Quixote and Sancho Panza run across characters who have actually read about them. Cervantes' great work shows us how the novel comes about when romantic idealism, here in the form of Quixote's chivalric fantasies, collides with the real world. Cervantes was not the first author to challenge romance in this way: the picaresque novel, with its downbeat, streetwise anti-heroism, had done that, at least implicitly, before he came to write. But *Don Quixote* is a work which actually takes this clash between romance and realism as its subject-matter, thus turning a formal issue into a thematic one.

If there is one place where romantic idealism and disenchanted realism meet, it is war. Few phenomena have provoked so much high-flown rhetoric along with so much bitter disgust. But Cervantes' novel runs war a close second. Quixote, who has been driven insane by reading too many romances, models his life on books, whereas realism models books on life. He lives, as they say, in a book, and talks like one too; but since he *is* a character in a book, this fantasy is also reality. The novel, then, starts life as among other things a satire of romance, and thus as a kind of anti-literature. It sends up rhetoric and fantasy from a hard-headed realist standpoint. But since a novel *is* rhetoric and fantasy, this is comically self-contradictory. Cervantes backs the world against the book, but he does so in a book. For a novelist to mock the language of literature is a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black. The kind of novel which speaks up for 'life' against 'literature' has all the bad faith of a count who speaks with a Cockney accent.

Cervantes assures us that he will give us this history 'neat and naked', without the usual

paraphernalia of literature. But a naked and neat style is just as much a *style* as any other. It is a mistake to think that some kinds of language are literally closer to the real world than others. 'Cat' is no closer to the real world than 'neophyte'. It might be closer to common speech, but that is different. The relationship between language and reality is not a spatial one. It is not that some words are free-floating, whereas others are jammed tight against material objects. Anyway, one writer's neat and naked may be another's ornamental. In a similar way, some realist fiction seems to believe that, say, hair-dryers are more real than hermeneutical phenomenology. They may be more useful, but the difference between them is not one of degrees of reality.

One of the first great novels, then, warns us off novels. Reading fiction can drive you mad. In fact, it is not fiction which leads to madness, but forgetting the fictionality of fiction. The problem arises from confusing it with reality, as Quixote does. A fiction which knows itself to be fiction is perfectly sane. In that sense, irony is what saves us. Cervantes, unlike Quixote, does not expect his inventions to be taken literally, not least the invention known as Don Quixote. He is not trying to fool us. Novelists do not lie, because they do not imagine that we take them to be telling the truth. They do not lie in the same sense that the advertising slogan 'Refreshes the parts that other beers can't reach' is not a lie, even though it is not true either.

The innkeeper in part 1 of *Don Quixote* remarks that it is fine for romances to be printed, since nobody could be ignorant enough to take them for true histories. Indeed, there is plenty of romance in *Don Quixote* itself. Yet romance is not as innocuous as the innkeeper suggests. It is really a kind of dangerous narcissism, in which (as Quixote comments at one point) you can believe that a woman is chaste and beautiful just because you want to. It does not need to take account of the way things are. Romantic idealism sounds edifying enough, but it is really a form of egoism in which the world becomes clay in your hands for you to mould as you wish. Fantasy, which sounds alluring enough, is at root a wayward individualism which insists on carving up the world as it pleases. It refuses to acknowledge what realism insists upon most: the recalcitrance of reality to our desires, the sheer stubborn inertia with which it baffles our designs upon it. Anti-realists are those who cannot get outside their own heads. It is a sort of moral astigmatism. It is just that Quixote's own errant individualism, ironically enough, takes the form of a devotion to the collective rituals and loyalties of the feudal order.

There is something admirable about idealism – Quixote's own ideals include protecting the poor and dispossessed – but also something absurd. So it is not just a matter of being a cynic rather than an idealist, but of upholding and deflating ideals in the same breath. Those who cannot see the world aright are likely to wreak grotesque damage upon it. Literary, moral and epistemological realism are all subtly interlinked. In Quixote's case, fantasy is very definitely connected to social privilege. A man who can mistake an ordinary woman for a high-born maiden is also someone who assumes that the world owes him a living. Power is fantastic to the core. But fantasy is also commercial to the core – a 'saleable commodity', as the priest observes to the canon in part 1 of the novel. Marvels and the market are no stranger to each other. Fantasy manipulates reality for its own self-serving ends, and reality, in the shape of commercial publishing, manipulates fantasy for its own self-interest.

Realism, it would appear, is out of favour because the ordinary reader delights in the exotic and extravagant. The irony is that the novel as a form is wedded to the common life, whereas the common people themselves prefer the monstrous and miraculous. Quixote's chivalric illusions are a kind of upper-class version of popular superstition. The common people do not wish to see their own faces in the mirror of art. They have quite enough ordinary life in their working hours without wanting to contemplate it in their leisure time as well. Labourers are more likely to resort to fantasy than

lawyers. Cervantes' priest recognizes that the labouring masses need circuses as w entertainment as much as work: they need to see plays, he believes, but the plays should to strip them of their worst extravagances. It is really only the cultivated elite who prefer their art to be plausible and true to Nature. Cervantes thus wins himself serious literary status by insisting on the verisimilitude of his writing – on 'probability and imitation', as the canon puts it – while at the same time craftily serving up crowd-pulling fantasies by creating a hero who acts them out.

If the novel is the genre which affirms the common life, it is also the form in which values are at their most diverse and conflicting. The novel from Defoe to Woolf is a product of modernity, and modernity is the period in which we cannot agree even on fundamentals. Our values and beliefs are fragmented and discordant, and the novel reflects this condition. It is the most hybrid of literary forms, a space in which different voices, idioms and belief-systems continually collide. Because of this, no one of them can predominate without a struggle. The realist novel quite often throws its weight behind a particular way of seeing the world, but it is 'relativizing' in its very form. It shifts from one perspective to another, hands the narrative to various characters in turn, and wins our sympathy for cases and characters we find discomforting by bringing them so vividly alive. In fact, this is one reason why the form was originally greeted with such suspicion. Imaginative realism can make a convivial comrade of the devil himself.

For Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel tends to emerge and disappear again, like a river threading its way through a limestone landscape. You find it, he thinks, when a centralized literary, linguistic and political authority is beginning to crumble.[2] It is when the verbal and ideological centre can no longer hold, as in Hellenistic Greece, imperial Rome or the waning of the medieval Church, that Bakhtin finds the novel emerging. Monolithic political, linguistic and cultural forms are giving way to what Bakhtin calls 'heteroglossia' or linguistic diversity, and this is represented above all by the novel. In his view, then, the novel is inherently anti-normative. It is a maverick form, sceptical of all authoritarian claims to truth. No doubt this makes it sound too inherently subversive. There is not much of the maverick about *Mansfield Park*, or much linguistic diversity in *The Waves*. In any case, not all diversity is radical, or all authority oppressive. Yet Bakhtin is surely right to see the novel as emerging from the stream of culture dripping with the shards and fragments of other forms. It is parasitic on the scraps and leavings of 'higher' cultural life-forms; and this means that it has only a negative identity. In its mixing of languages and forms of life, it is a model of modern society, not simply a reflection on it.

Hegel saw the novel as the epic of a prosaic modern world. It has all the range and populousness of the epic, without, for the most part, its supernatural dimension. The novel resembles the classical epic in its consuming interest in narrative, dramatic action and the material world. It differs from it, however, in being a discourse of the present rather than of the past. For the novel is above all a *contemporary* form, as its very name suggests. To this extent, it has more in common with *The Times* than with Homer. When it turns to the past, it is often to treat it as the prehistory of the present. Even the historical novel is generally a coded reflection on the present. The novel is the mythology of a civilization fascinated by its own everyday existence. It is neither behind or ahead of its times, but abreast of them. It reflects them without morbid nostalgia or delusory hope. In this sense, literary realism is also moral realism. This refusal of both nostalgia and utopia means that the realist novel, politically speaking, is for the most part neither reactionary nor revolutionary. Instead, it is typically reformist in spirit. It is committed to the present, but to a present which is always in the process of change. It is a this-worldly rather than an other-worldly phenomenon; but since change is part of this-worldliness, it is not a backward-looking one either.

If the novel is a distinctively modern form, whatever its ancient pedigree, it is partly b refuses to be bound by the past. To be 'modern' means to relegate to the past everything that h up to 10 minutes ago. Modernity is the only epoch which actually defines itself, vacuously enough, by its up-to-dateness. Like a rebellious adolescent, the modern is defined by a definitive rupture with its parentage. If this is a liberating experience, it can also be a traumatic one. It is the form which breaks with traditional models. It can no longer rely on the paradigms offered by custom, mythology, Nature, antiquity, religion or community. And this is closely related to the rise of a new kind of individualism, which finds all such collective paradigms too constricting. Whereas the epic bears the signature of no one author, the novel bears the fingerprints of an individual writer, known as style. Its impatience with traditional models is also related to the rise of pluralism, as values become too diverse to be unified. The more values there are, the more of a problem value itself becomes.

The novel was born at the same time as modern science, and shares its sober, secular, hard-headed, investigative spirit, along with its suspicion of classical authority. But this means that, lacking authority outside itself, it must find it in itself. Having shed all traditional sources of authority, it must become self-authorizing. Authority now means not conforming yourself to an origin, but becoming the origin yourself.

This has the glamour of originality, as the word 'novel' would suggest. But it also means that the novel's authority is ungrounded in anything outside itself, which is what renders it precarious. In this sense, the novel is a sign of the modern human subject. It, too, is 'original', in the sense that modern men and women are supposed to be the authors of their own existence. Who you are is no longer determined by kinship, tradition or social status; instead, it is something you determine for yourself. Modern subjects, like the heroes of modern novels, make themselves up as they go along. They are self-grounding and self-determining, and in this lies the meaning of their freedom. It is, however, a fragile, negative kind of freedom, which lacks any warranty beyond itself. There is nothing in the actual world to back it up. Absolute value has evaporated from the world in the modern age, which is what makes for unlimited freedom. But it is also what renders that freedom so empty. If everything is permitted, it is only because nothing is intrinsically more valuable than anything else.

We have seen that the novel and the epic differ in their attitudes to the past. But there is another key distinction between them. The epic deals with a world of nobles and military heroes, whereas the novel deals with the common life. It is the great *popular* genre, the one mainstream literary mode which speaks the language of the people. The novel is the great vernacular literary art, which draws upon the resources of ordinary speech rather than some specialized literary language. It is not the first literary form in which the common people stage an appearance. But is the first to treat them with unwavering seriousness. Our contemporary version of this is no doubt the soap opera, which we enjoy not so much for the occasional dramatic turn of plot but because we find the familiar and everyday a strange source of fascination in itself. The modern equivalent of *Moll Flanders* is *EastEnders*. The staggering popularity of Reality TV programmes which consist simply in someone pottering mindlessly around his kitchen for hours on end suggests one interesting truth: that many of us find the pleasures of the routine and repetitive even more seductive than we do the stimulus of adventure.

The value of everyday life is the theme of one of the greatest works of literary scholarship ever published, Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis*.[3] For Auerbach, realism is the literary form which finds the workaday life of men and women supremely valuable in itself. One of the earliest examples of this in English writing can be found in Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, which, in however idealizing a form, speaks up for the common life as a source of creativity. The novel for Auerbach is

an incipiently democratic kind of art, hostile to what he sees as the static, hierarchical, d socially exclusive art of classical antiquity. To adopt Walter Benjamin's terms, it is which destroys the 'aura' of distance and majesty which clings to such classical artefacts, bringing life closer to us rather than raising it beyond our reach. Authors in *Mimesis* score high marks for being vulgar, vigorous, earthy, dynamic, demotic, grotesque and historically minded, and are rapped smartly over the knuckles for being stylized, elitist, idealized, stereotyped and non-developmental.

There is, so Auerbach argues, no serious treatment of the common people in the culture of classical antiquity. Contrast this with a text like the New Testament, which grants a humble fisherman like Peter potentially tragic status. According to the philosopher Charles Taylor, it was Christianity which first introduced the revolutionary notion that everyday life could be precious in itself.[4] As Auerbach argues, it is the Christian gospel, with its image of God as incarnate in the poor and destitute, its carnivalesque reversals of high and low, which provides the source of realism's elevation of the commonplace. For Christianity, salvation is a humdrum matter of whether you feed the hungry and visit the sick, not of some esoteric cult. Jesus is a kind of sick joke of a Messiah, a parody of regal pomp as he rides a donkey towards his squalid death as a political criminal.

With the advent of realism, then, the common people make their collective entry into the literary arena, long before they make an appearance on the political stage. It is one of the momentous events of human history, which we now take casually for granted. It is hard for us to think ourselves back into a culture for which, say, relations between parents and children, or everyday economic life, was of little artistic merit. Auerbach, a Jewish refugee from Hitler, was writing about the novel while in exile in Istanbul at the same time as Bakhtin was writing about it as a dissident in Stalinist Russia; and both men saw in it a populist strike against autocratic power. In Bakhtin's view, plebeian culture nourishes forms of realism in the classical, medieval and modern epochs; and these finally burst through into the mainstream of 'high' literature in the shape of the novel.

There are problems with these claims. For one thing, realism and the novel are not the same thing. Not all realism is novelistic, as Auerbach is aware, and not all novels are realist. Nor do all novels smack of a plebeian vigour. There is not much earth beneath the fingernails of Mr Knightley or Mrs Dalloway. In any case, earthiness is by no means always subversive. A work of art is not radical simply because it portrays the experience of ordinary people. It is sometimes felt that the kind of realism which takes the lid off poverty and squalor, revealing the horrors of the social underworld to a sheltered middle class, is necessarily disruptive. But this assumes that people are insensitive to social deprivation only because they are unaware of it, which is far too charitable a view of them. Realism in the sense of verisimilitude – truth to life – is not necessarily revolutionary. As Bertolt Brecht remarked, putting a factory on stage will tell you nothing about capitalism.

If realism means showing the world as it really is, rather than how some ancient Egyptian priest or medieval knight conceived of it, then we are instantly in trouble, since how the world is is a subject of fierce contention. Suppose some future civilization were to discover a copy of Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame*, in which two elderly characters spend their time sitting in dustbins. They would not be able to tell whether the play was realist or non-realist simply by looking at it. They would need to know, for example, whether stashing old people away in dustbins was standard geriatric practice in mid-twentieth-century Europe.

To call something 'realist' is to confess that it is not the real thing. False teeth can be realistic, but not the Foreign Office. Postmodern culture could be said to be realistic, in the sense of being faithful to a surreal world of surfaces, schizoid subjects and random sensations. Realist art is as much an artifice as any other kind of art. A writer who wants to sound realist might include phrases such as

'A florid-faced cyclist laboured unsteadily past them', when she could just as easily have w carrot-haired boy crawled from under the garden fence, whistling tunelessly'. Such detail perfectly gratuitous from the viewpoint of plot: they are there simply to signal 'This is realism'. They have, as Henry James remarked, the 'air of reality'. In this sense, realism is calculated contingency. It is the form which seeks to merge itself so thoroughly with the world that its status as art is suppressed. It is as though its representations have become so transparent that we stare straight through them to reality itself. The ultimate representation, so it seems, would be one which was identical with what it represented. But then, ironically, it would no longer be a representation at all. A poet whose words somehow 'become' apples and plums would not be a poet but a greengrocer.

For some commentators, realism in art is actually more realistic than reality itself, because it can show how the world typically is, shorn of its blunders and contingencies. Reality, being a messy, imperfect affair, quite often fails to live up to our expectations of it, as when it allowed Robert Maxwell to sink into the ocean rather than stand in the dock. Jane Austen or Charles Dickens would never have tolerated such a botched conclusion. In an unaccountable bit of bungling, history allowed Henry Kissinger to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, an event so outrageously surreal that no self-respecting realist novelist would have thought it up, other perhaps than as a piece of black humour.

It is dangerous, then, to talk about realism as representing 'life as it really is', or 'the experience of the common people'. Both notions are too controversial to be used so lightly. Realism is a matter of representation; and you cannot compare representations with 'reality' to check how realistic they are, since what we mean by 'reality' itself involves questions of representation. Anyway, what is so impressive about 'realist' representations? Why are we so struck by an image of a pork chop that looks exactly like a pork chop? Partly, no doubt, because we admire the skill which goes into forging the resemblance. But perhaps also because of a fascination with mirroring and doubling which lurks deep in the human psyche, and which lies at the roots of magic. In that sense, realism, which Auerbach sees as the most mature of forms, may also be the most regressive. What was intended as an alternative to magic and mystery may itself be a prime example of them.

Not all novels are realist, but realism is the dominant style of the modern English novel. It is also the yardstick of so many critical judgements. Literary characters who are not 'realistic', in the sense of being credible, animated, well-rounded and psychologically complex, are generally awarded low marks by the critical establishment. It is not clear where this leaves Sophocles's Teiresias, the *Macbeth* witches, Milton's God, Swift's Gulliver, Dickens's Fagin or Beckett's Pozzo. Realism is a kind of art congenial to an ascendant middle class, with its relish for the material world; its impatience with the formal, ceremonial and metaphysical; its insatiable curiosity about the individual self; its robust faith in historical progress. In his classic study *The Rise of the Novel*,[5] Ian Watt regards all of these as reasons why the modern English novel emerged in the eighteenth century. He also adduces the middle-class interest in individual psychology, its secular and empiricist view of the world, and its devotion to the concrete and specific. As far as the ceremonial is concerned, it is also worth noting that the novel is not an 'occasional' form, like those masques, odes or elegies written – perhaps for an aristocratic patron – for special occasions. This, too, is a mark of its routine rather than patrician status.

For many eighteenth-century commentators, the answer to the question 'What is a novel?' would be: 'A trashy piece of fiction fit only for servants and females'. On this definition, Jackie Collins writes novels but William Golding does not. For these early observers, the novel was less like the *The Times* than the *News of the World*. It was also like a newspaper because it was a commodity you usually bought and read only once, as opposed to the more traditional practice of possessing a small

clutch of edifying works which you perused over and over again. The novel belonged to of speed, ephemerality and disposability, playing something like the role of e-mail tc correspondence. 'Novel' meant sensationalist fantasy, which is one reason why writers like Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson called their works 'histories' instead.

Eighteenth-century gentlemen did not by and large rate novelty very highly, believing as they did that the few truths necessary to a well-ordered human life had long since been apparent. The new was thus bound to be either bogus or trivial. Whatever was valid was also venerable. The novel was not 'literature', and certainly not 'art'. To pretend that your narrative was a real-life one – that you had stumbled across it in a pile of mouldy letters or manuscripts – was a way of indicating that it was not romantic garbage. Even if your claim was not taken seriously, simply making it was a way of being taken seriously.

In the end, the English novel would wreak its vengeance on those who dismissed it as fit only for females by producing some magnificent portrayals of women, from Clarissa Harlowe and Emma Woodhouse to Molly Bloom and Mrs Ramsay. It also produced some distinguished female exponents of the craft. As a form, it would grow in importance as poetry became increasingly privatized. As poetry gradually ceases to be a public genre somewhere between Shelley and Swinburne, its moral and social functions pass to the novel, in a new division of literary labour. By the mid-nineteenth century, the word 'poetry' has become more or less synonymous with the interior, the personal, the spiritual or psychological, in ways which would no doubt have come as a mighty surprise to Dante, Milton and Pope. The poetic has now been redefined as the opposite of the social, discursive, doctrinal and conceptual, all of which has been relegated to prose fiction. The novel takes care of the outer world, while poetry copes with the inner one. It is not a distinction which Henry Fielding, let alone Ben Jonson, would have found all that intelligible. The very distance between the two modes reflects a growing alienation between the public and the private.

The problem for poetry is that it seems increasingly remote from 'life' as an industrial capitalist society is coming to define it. There is no obvious place for the lyric in a world of insurance companies and mass-produced meat pies. The phrase 'poetic justice' really means the kind of justice we would not expect to see done in real life. There is, however, an equal problem with the novel's very closeness to social existence. If the novel is a 'slice of life', how can it teach us more general truths? This is a particular problem for devoutly Protestant eighteenth-century authors like Samuel Richardson, for whom the artifice of fiction is only really justified if it conveys a moral truth. Otherwise it is idle, even sinful, fantasy.

The dilemma is that the more graphic you make your realism, the more this drives the moral truth home; but the more it simultaneously undermines it, since the reader becomes more attentive to the realist detail than to the universal truth it is meant to exemplify. There is a related problem here. You cannot, as a novelist, argue that the world should be changed in certain respects unless you dramatize what is wrong with it as compellingly as possible. But the more effectively you do this, the less changeable the world may come to seem. Dickens's later novels portray a society so false, warped and stiflingly oppressive that it is hard to see how it could be repaired.

Richardson knew that in reading the realist novel, we believed and disbelieved in its discourse at one and the same time. We surrender ourselves imaginatively to the narrative, at the same time as another part of our minds appreciates that this is simply make-believe. Richardson speaks in his private correspondence of 'that kind of historical faith, which fiction itself is generally read (with), even tho' we know it to be fiction'. It is as though the part of our mind that is not taken in by the story is free to reflect on it and draw a moral lesson from it. In this way, realism can be preserved, but it

Written by one of the world's leading literary theorists, this book provides a wide-ranging, accessible and humorous introduction to the English novel from Daniel Defoe to the present day. It covers the works of major authors, including Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, Laurence Sterne,

Walter Scott, Jane Austen, the Brontes, Charles Dickens George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Henry James, Joseph Conrad ,Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce. It distils the essentials of the theory of the novel. It follows the model of Eagleton's hugely popular "Literary Theory: An Introduction

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