THE IDEA OF THE NOVEL IN EUROPE

1600-1800

IOAN WILLIAMS

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Preface

The Idea of the Novel is neither history nor polemic though it shares some of the qualities of both. It is designed to add to, and partly to correct, existing views of the novel's development during the period from 1600 to 1800, by demonstration rather than by argument. There are strong tendencies in historical accounts of the novel either to expand the concept beyond any usefulness as a critical term or to define it too narrowly, linking its appearance too closely to specific social and cultural contexts. It is often assumed that the novel developed first in eighteenth-century England, that its rise was linked to the process by which distinctively middle-class attitudes and circumstances developed and that one of its essential qualities is the realistic or critical spirit associated with them. It is often spoken of as an anti-romantic form, historically later than romance, which embodies the attitudes of previously dominant, aristocratic, classes. To some extent, of course, this view has sound historical basis, nowhere more convincingly presented than in Ian Watt's justly celebrated *Rise of the Novel* (1958), but it seems to me distorted and a serious danger in so far as it is often made the basis or the excuse for critical judgements of individual novels and pronouncements about the future of the form.

Of course the novel did go through a revolutionary phase of development during the eighteenth century, particularly in England, a development which prepared for and even anticipated what happened in the following century, when it became the dominant literary form throughout Europe. What happened was essentially a change of focus, which brought the novel closer to the texture of individual and social experience and widened its range to include new areas of both. I want to suggest, however, that this change did not amount to the development of a new literary form but rather the evolution of an existing one, and

that the development of the novel through the previous two hundred years in Europe as a whole may be seen as continuous though irregular.

In effect, though it is not part of my primary purpose to do so, my thesis challenges conventional assumptions about the connection between the rise of the middle classes and the rise of the novel. This is not because I doubt the existence of a causal relationship, or series of relationships, but rather because I feel that the whole business is a great deal more complex than it is often assumed to be. The key to understanding this aspect of history seems to me to lie with Lucien Goldman rather than Ian Watt. What we need to understand is the relationship between the framework of values and experiences embodied in individual literary works and the multifarious, overlapping systems and structures of value and experience in contemporary life. Class, as Goldman has demonstrated beyond dispute, is at all times the most fundamentally important of these structures and perhaps he is right in maintaining the traditional Marxist viewpoint that it is to class and its underlying economic basis that we will have final resort in our attempt to understand literature. But in the first instance, in so far as we are interested in the particular dimension of literature, we must start with the context in which social and cultural values are transformed, reflected, or distorted, in individual novels. One of the major factors which affects this process is the group of ideas, techniques and standards associated with particular genres. This group, different in its constituents from time to time, or from place to place, is yet sufficiently clear in its central principles to be identifiable as such, and it is this which I refer to when I use the phrase 'The Idea of the Novel'. In itself it comprises an important structure within which social and moral values undergo transformation to become the constituent parts of literary works. Like any other group of ideas, or any other 'structure', of course, it lacks material embodiment except that which it finds in individual novels. To study it, and so to understand the way in which these individual novels have historically been related and remain so, we must move to and fro between them and from them to the circumstances in which they acquired their particular being. It is perhaps not unreasonable to describe this process as imitating the dialectic which Marxist critics discover in the process by which all human activity takes place.

This is why, although the book rests on certain assumptions as to the nature of the novel as a literary form, I have chosen not to argue them out in the text. It seems to me that an objective definition of the novel is impossible, except in the simplest and most general terms. On the other

hand, of course, my own particular idea of the novel has dictated the method of study and the selection of texts, so it is perhaps necessary to say that I regard the novel as a distinctively modern, that is, a post-Renaissance form, which came into being at the point when consciousness of the individual as an end in himself and not merely as part of a larger social, political or metaphysical entity, introduced a new element into European thought. From that point on it became possible for fiction to be used in a new way—that is, in order to provide a dimension in which the relations between individual and social interests could be explored and adjusted *directly* and in concrete detail.

At this point Cervantes published *Don Quixote* and the history of the novel began. Its subsequent development depended on particular social and cultural conditions. The fact that it was possible to think of the individual life as an end in itself, requiring interpretation in its own terms, did not necessarily mean that society as a whole in any Western European country proceeded to do it. On the contrary, although the period 1600–1800 reflects a constantly increasing awareness of individual experience as such, it also records the fact that for a long time European society, for varying social and intellectual reasons, refused to adjust its social and intellectual structures to match that increasing pressure. The novel, if it is to flourish in the hands of many rather than few, and come close to the centre of cultural activity, demands certain conditions. Above all it requires that there be a certain consonance between the moral and social values that writers of a given society wish to project within it and the actual forms of life in that society. This consonance is particularly marked in the nineteenth century, when the values embodied in literary culture in France and England especially were capable of being presented as social or psychological realities. This of course we may attribute to the dominance of a group of classes committed to the idea of reconciling personal experience with social experience. Individual writers may well have argued that a given society was corrupt because that reconciliation could not take place, but it remained conceivable in artistic and psychological terms. The novelist continued to live himself in a world fundamentally similar to that of the novel!

The enormous success of the novel in the nineteenth century has been the primary factor which has distorted our view of its history during the whole period from 1600, making it difficult not to accept the application of crude evolutionary terms. The explosive development of ideas in what we call the Romantic period, which preceded and prepared for the achievement of the nineteenth-century novelists, represents a sudden

increase in the speed by which ideas and combinations of ideas present throughout the post-Renaissance period were brought together and developed, but this is in no sense a culmination. In a very real sense we still live in the shadow of the Renaissance, and it is interesting to see that the position of the novel is now much closer to that which it occupied in the middle years of the eighteenth century than the middle years of the nineteenth. Though it would take me too far from my subject even to suggest it, it could be that the middle of the present century shows characteristics similar to those of the period between 1600 and 1800. The most important consideration during those years was that although the novel remained constantly a possibility and was constantly realising itself in the hands of individual writers, conditions as a whole were unfavourable to its consistent development. In many different ways, which it is the business of the book to suggest, circumstances made it difficult for writers to project a criticism of the world in which they lived primarily by representing actual forms of experience. Consequently there was no consistently strong pressure which urged towards the choice of the novel as a literary form, and when it did present itself to the individual there was a strong likelihood that the encounter would not be successful.

The method of *The Idea of the Novel* has been dictated by the way in which these conditions differ from place to place at various times during the period. In the beginning the emphasis falls on Cervantes as an isolated figure, then moves to the background of the novel in France, to literary theory, then to individual works in relation to each other in the years from 1715 to 1760, and eventually to the synoptic approach of the last chapters, which attempt to relate development and lack of development in the transitional period from 1760 to 1800. The area is vast and the approach necessarily selective. I have tried to focus on individual novels, the source and embodiment of any 'Idea'. As in a previous book, *The Realist Novel in England*, I have tried to give a sketch rather than a definition, and one which I hope will be confirmed in its outlines by subsequent studies.

Throughout the book I have tried to present a readable text, though I have not ventured to modernise or otherwise change the spelling, punctuation or presentation of the texts I have used. Major quotations from languages other than English are followed in the text by a translation, which perhaps tends to err on the side of the literal rendering: minor quotations are translated in the text but the originals are given in footnotes. Quotations from German authors are given only in English translation because that is how I have read them myself. In

each case a full reference to the edition used is given on the first occasion and thereafter in abbreviation.

I would like to mention my gratitude to the University of Warwick, whose generosity in the matter of sabbatical leave made it easier for me to write this book, and to the University College of Aberystwyth, which gave me refuge while I finished it.

A final point: the book is written in English rather than in Welsh partly because it reflects a debate which takes place between all the countries to whose literature it refers and because English is in some measure its common medium, but largely because English is at present the only language of the majority of my countrymen. Nevertheless I think of it primarily as a contribution to Welsh criticism. *The Idea of the Novel* attempts to combine respect for the particularity of times, places and literary works with a recognition of the shaping forces at work in distinctive cultural environments and linguistic contexts. It seems to me that such an attempt, disregarding the degree of its competence, relates very directly to the cultural condition of my own country and in large measure reflects its influence.

Lledrod, 1978 IOAN WILLIAMS

Contents

1 The Novel as Romance: Cervantes' *Don Quixote*

Historians of the novel tend to relate the appearance of the two separate volumes of *Don Quixote* (1605 and 1615) to the development in Spain and in Europe as a whole of the picaresque tale. Chronologically this is tempting. The anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* appeared as early as 1554 but was followed by Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599–1604) in the years immediately before the appearance of *Don Quixote I* and by Quevedo's *La Vida del Buscón* in 1626. In so far as there was a picaresque movement, Cervantes must have been affected by it, and its influence is certainly clear in those of his *Novelas Ejemplares* (1613) which depict events in the lower levels of society. The relationship, however, is no closer than this. In the first place it is important to remember that Cervantes drew much of the inspiration for his own realism, in common with the picaresque authors, from medieval sources, and especially from works like the *Tragicomedia de Calixto y Melibea* (1499–1502). Secondly, it is important to remember that Cervantes became a novelist not because he shared the reductive realism of the picaresque writers or the medieval moralists, but because he was an idealist. In his case awareness of material reality and of the elements which reduce human aspirations and human dignity made up a secondary element in his sensibility. Without that secondary element Cervantes could never have become a novelist, but the primary impulse which shaped his *Don Quixote* came from elsewhere.

Around 1600 the cruder, sharper, rationalism of Quevedo was more modern that the humanistic attitude of Cervantes. But Cervantes' conservatism was an important factor in his ability to transform older forms of prose fiction into the novel without taking the further step towards modernism which would have impoverished his work. For other writers of the period modern ways of thinking meant the aban-

donment of the whole system of idealism centred around the neo-Platonic ideas of love as enshrined in Renaissance romance and pastoral, just at the moment when they had reached their fullest development. Cervantes was able to belong to both worlds and as a result he came to create a world of his own. In *Don Quixote* he works within the same framework of sensibility as in his pastoral *Galatea* (1585) and his Heliodoran romance *Persiles y Sigismunda* (1617). This framework is fundamentally similar to that shared by his contemporaries in France and England, Honoré d'Urfé and Sir Philip Sidney. For all three, in whose hands romance takes on new forms, the central factor in the human situation is love, the mainspring of all things, 'the movement which bears all finite things towards God',[1] and an idealist mode of literature the only means of expressing truth directly. But of course, both d'Urfé and Sidney were social and cultural aristocrats.[2] Cervantes shared with Shakespeare a breadth of vision, a sense of the nation as a whole and enough of the modern spirit to bring about a shift in his whole perspective. Behind *Don Quixote* there are several shadowy figures—the knights of *Amadis* and *Tirante lo Blanc*, the impoverished hidalgo from *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the peasant hero of medieval folklore and the nameless villeins who make up the mobs and armies of chronicle and romance. But in the forefront of the novel are two characters who are uniquely alive because they can react to one another and to circumstances, overflowing the categories which produced them and through this very flexibility reinforcing the central statement of the whole novel.

What transformed the author of *Galatea* into the creator of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza was the practical sense that he shared with Shakespeare. As it grew stronger in his later years it obliged him to question the relationship between the concepts of romance and the human content which they might be supposed to have. And this questioning led him not to the realism of the picaresque writers but rather to a reinforced awareness of the reality of concepts. From then on his major work focused on the constant interchange which takes place in experience between conceptual factors and the demands and impulses arising from human nature. The basic tension between Don

[1] '. . . le mouvement qui porte tout le fini vers Dieu.' A. Adam, *Histoire de la Littérature Française au xvii^e Siècle*, I (1962), p. 7.

[2] Honoré d'Urfé (1567–1625), related to the Ducal house of Savoy. Soldier, dramatist and moralist, his pastoral romance, *L'Astrée*, appeared in parts between 1607 and 1627. Sir Philip Sidney (1554–86), like d'Urfé, a soldier, and like him too, killed in action, was nephew to the Earl of Leicester. His *Arcadia* appeared in different versions in 1590 and 1598.

Quixote and Sancho derives from the fact that they represent different attitudes to human experience. One is an idealist, the other a realist, one stressing the importance of the conceptual as the only reality, the other preoccupied with physical appetites. But of course they demonstrate in their relationship, and even in their own characters, the central fact that conceptual and material elements exist only in terms of one another. And their relationship is the frame through which we are introduced to a whole network of narrative and characterisation, a complex analysis of human nature within the terms of Renaissance romance literature.

It is often assumed that it was from the conflict between these attitudes to life, and particularly from the imposition of a questioning, reductive, anti-idealist, spirit on older, romance or idealist standards, that the novel arose, and consequently, that the supremacy of the reductive element is an essential quality of the novel as a literary form. It is certainly true that the reductive spirit is the most common agent in the process by which a story becomes a novel, but the other, shaping, conceptual, factor which gives meaning to experience and form to fiction, the spirit more exclusively developed in romance, is at least equally essential. And farther than this, it is historically precedent over the realist element. What happened in Cervantes' fiction was not the imposition of a realist impulse on romance material, leading to the development of a new mode. Rather the realist impulse, not historically new in itself but inherited from earlier literature, came together for the first time with a spirit recently developed in isolation—the ambitiously humanistic impulse of Renaissance romance and pastoral. Without *this*, *Don Quixote* was simply inconceivable. The impulse to write the book in the first place, to satirise the chivalric romance, came not in the form of a simple anti-romantic, anti-idealist impulse, but rather in the form of a desire to impose on the shapeless body of chivalric romance the criteria, consistency and form of Renaissance fiction. The satiric and reductive impulse for Cervantes always remains within a framework which is conceptual and idealist.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the *Novelas Ejemplares* (1613), where realist and idealist elements are kept in conscious and elaborate balance throughout, and this important volume of tales makes the best possible introduction to *Don Quixote* itself. One tale in particular, however, makes Cervantes' position particularly clear, partly because it treats a theme which is commonly the means of asserting a reductive view of human character, and partly because it exists in more than one version.

This is the seventh in his series of thirteen tales, 'El Celoso Extremeñno', the central situation of which Cervantes treated first in the early *entrémes* (one-act farce) entitled *El Viejo Celoso*. Here we have the standard treatment of the old man married to a young girl who succeeds in cuckolding him in spite of all his precautions. It ends with her throwing water in his face while her lover escapes and with the neighbours brought in to witness her exculpation. As it took shape in the exemplary novel, for which we have a manuscript version dating from around 1606,[3] the story is completely different in tone and emphasis. Not surprisingly, in the prose fiction the emphasis is shifted from action to character. Cervantes presents the story in the first place through the character of the husband, and we come to the central situation, his imprisoning a young wife in a house with double doors and no windows, guarded by a eunuch porter, only after we have learnt his background and character, the outline of his life and reasons for his marriage. The central character of the wife is lightly sketched. The third protagonist, the would-be lover, is given more detailed treatment, as the primary actor in the whole narrative. The central action predictably concerns the process by which the young man obtains an entrance, persuading the negro porter that he can teach him to play the guitar, introducing a soporific ointment into the house which the women are encouraged to use on the husband so as to enable them to take pleasure in his singing undisturbed. An important factor is the lust of the duenna who hopes to make the seduction of the mistress of the house a means of satisfying herself. The catastrophe occurs when the husband wakes unexpectedly, comes across the young man and his wife asleep in each other's arms, retires to his bed and dies of grief, forgiving his wife and urging her in his will to marry the young man. In comic versions of this theme the standard reaction to the assertion of nature against restraint is anger and reconciliation. Here instead we have shock and grief, an attempt on the part of the husband at acceptance which his own nature is unable to sustain. The wife's response is to refuse to marry her lover and to go into a nunnery. So, rather than leaving us with a sense of the essential healthiness and reasonableness of the basic impulses of human nature, Cervantes' story is problematic. It leaves us instead with a sense that the ultimate importance of concepts in human character is at least as great as the jealousy in the mind of the husband. Carrizales, the jealous husband, is capable of a relationship with his wife only within the framework of his own ideas—even though he accepts her adultery intellectually, he is quite incapable of adjusting to

[3] See A. Castro, *Hacia Cervantes*, 3rd ed. (Madrid, 1967).

it emotionally.

This point is made far more forcibly in the published version of the story which appeared in 1613. Here Cervantes introduced one substantial change which greatly developed the complexity of the tale. That is, he omitted the adultery, leaving Leonora victorious over her lover:

> Pero, con todo esto, el valor de Leonora fué tal, que en el tiempo que más le convenía, le mostró contra las fuerzas villanas de su astuto engañador, pues no fueron bastantes a vencerla, y él se cansó en balde, y ella quedó vencedora, y entrambos dormidos.
>
> But with all this, the fortitude of Leonora was such that in the time when it was most needed it showed itself against the villainous efforts of her astute deceiver since they were not sufficient to defeat her; and he tired himself in vain, and she remained victorious, and both slept.
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> *Novelas Ejemplares*, Clásicos Castellanos II (1969), p. 158

In this case, what should we make of the husband's grief and consequent death? In the first version we attribute it to the shock of discovering the reality of the situation, that nature asserts itself against restraints. But in this case, nature has not so asserted itself. Leonora actually is chaste, in spite of temptation, and consequently Carrizales' death is not the result of a realisation of reality, but rather a failure to allow for the ability of the conceptual element in her character to prevail against the instinctive, sexual motivation. The alteration has considerable effect in strengthening our awareness of Cervantes' own faith in this element, but more important than this, it throws the power of the concept which works on Carizales' mind into high relief. The total effect of the whole story is closely related to that of 'El Curioso Impertinente' in *Don Quixote*, and indeed to that whole novel. That is, it forces us to revise our crude idea of the relationship between conflicting elements in human nature. Most important, however, it goes beyond comedy and posits a question about the nature of reality itself as an interrelationship between those different elements.

Don Quixote does this, of course, much more thoroughly than any single story could have done, not only because of its greater length and complexity but also because it is designed to work out much more insistently issues which are held in suspension in the exemplary novels as a whole. In both works Cervantes' thought moves in the same direction. From the crude physical confrontation between ideal and

reality which begins *Don Quixote* and persists throughout it, Cervantes moves towards complexity in the first instance through the introduction of Sancho Panza. Then he introduces and gradually gives more and more prominence to the intrigue regarding Cardenio, Dorotea, Fernando and Luscinda, a love-intrigue borrowed from Montemayor's *Diana* (1559) and strikingly close to the situation Shakespeare develops from the same source in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*. The interweaving of these two sources of action—the journey of the two heroes and the love-intrigue—is central to *Don Quixote*, having the effect of moving the action back into a romance world whose values and meanings are clear. At the same time the texture of the novel introduces a third factor. The structural frame of the journey and the intrigue does not account for the great number of conversations, encounters, inserted stories and narratives which make up the stuff of Cervantes' narrative. The principle of organisation of the book is as arbitrary as that of any Renaissance romance. In fact *Don Quixote is* a romance, to all intents and purposes, putting forward by means of fiction and discourse an elaborate analysis of life as a whole in terms common to romantic fictions of the day. It is also a novel though, because the arbitrary analysis of romance is dramatised in an unprecedented way. It is an analysis of life as a whole, made in its own terms. This is achieved in two ways. Firstly, through his skilful manipulation of the narrative process and our awareness of it, Cervantes fixes the debate concerning the nature of experience within our own present consciousness. Secondly, by allowing his characterisation of Don Quixote and Sancho to swell to the proportions of humour, giving them independence and instability, making them a law to themselves, Cervantes creates a frame within which the conceptualisation which his other narrative material demands is subject to continual modification and questioning.

This, of course, is primarily a description of his method in *Don Quixote I*, published in 1605. Tone and technique, and even subject matter, are different in *Don Quixote II* (1615). In the later volume Cervantes was answering a challenge from the modern spirit, in the person of Avellaneda, but his answer took the form of a reassertion of his basic principles, so that in a very important way the two separately published novels make up a unity. By 1615 the lightness, ease and plentiful elaboration have given way to a more rational, consistent mode of organisation, and the romance techniques are muted. But of course, Don Quixote and Sancho remain as humorous as ever and Cervantes' narrative mode is unchanged, itself an essential part of his