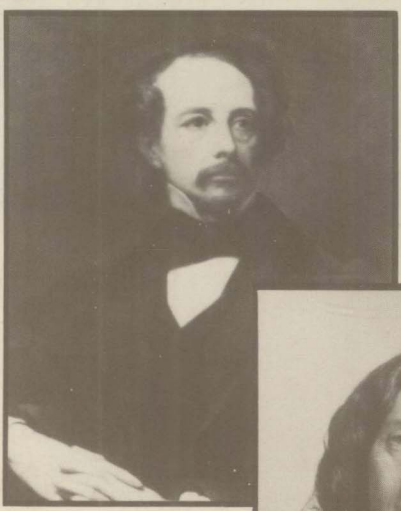
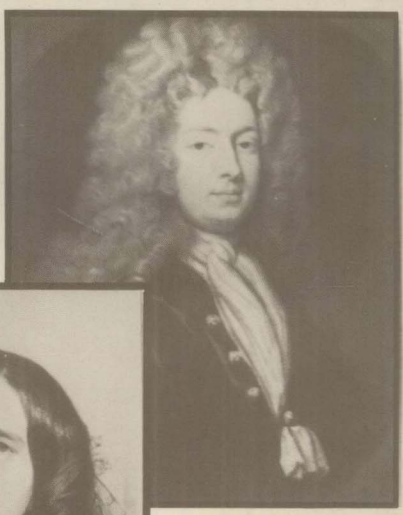

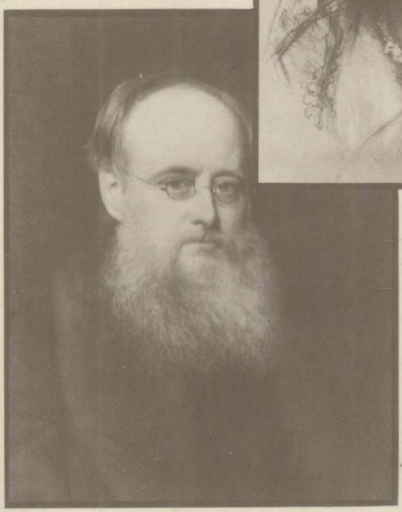
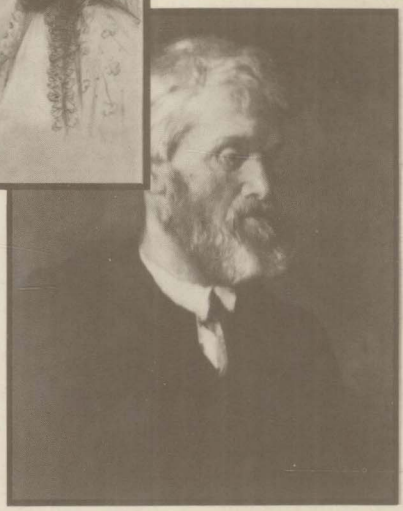

MEANING AND SIGNS IN FICTION

Alan Kennedy

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Preface

Pound's challenge to poetry and poets is 'make it new'. It is, to say the least, a sobering thought to have ringing in one's ears when setting out on the well-worn paths that lead one to Dickens, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Joseph Conrad and others that are discussed in this book. The novel, as D. H. Lawrence so well said, is the one bright book of life. The novelty, the life, the brightness of the novel require not only constant renewal from novelists, but also fresh experience by readers. Readers must actively construct anew for themselves the meaning of fictions. This does not mean that the meanings they construct and their experiences are necessarily different on the whole from the meanings and experiences of previous readers. It must be possible to make it new without making it radically different in kind. Whether or not it succeeds in doing so, this book tries to meet that challenge. It tries to do this, in part, by assuming that all novels are contemporary—contemporary, that is, with the reader. This is the same thing, of course, as saying that they are timeless, or saying that they are 'poetic' constructions that, when activated by a reader, speak beyond the limits of the time of their production by an author. It would be inaccurate, therefore, to speak only of continuities in the novels here considered. The patterns are more like spontaneous recurrences. The central event that gives rise to these recurrences is the novelist's recurrent need to structure meaning in signs. In one particular sense, then, this book is an attempt at a structural history of the novel, although it is more accurately a first try at a history of the way meaning is structured in the novel.

It happens that questions of meaning, signification, and structure are amongst the most important and controversial questions of this time. This fact has one particular advantage here, in that it facilitates the attempt to read 'traditional' fiction as contemporary fiction. It should be added that while the topics of this book come close to topics studied by 'structuralists', I am not one of their number and have no expertise or training in their field of study. What I know of the subject I have picked out of the air—and a few books—as we all do. Saul Bellow's Herzog says that '"Humankind lives mainly upon perverted ideas"'. He suggests that any philosopher '"who wants to keep his contact with mankind should pervert his own system in advance to see how it will really look a few decades after adoption"'. Structuralists will probably welcome me in this role of perverter of their ideas. Perhaps they themselves have already taken Herzog's advice. In any case, the reader can be reassured that he will need no specialised knowledge of 'structuralism' in order to read the following account of fiction.

Meaning, significance, structure are topics too important to be left to the 'experts'. What I have tried to do is to allow another neglected group of experts, novelists, to speak for themselves on these matters. Many of the general ideas and conclusions may seem to be counter to received opinion of our times. The ideas will be seen to be justified, if at all, by the degree to which they are seen to be appropriate as ways to renew experience of the novels themselves.

Some of the chapters can be read as independent essays on individual novelists, but there is some advantage in reading the book as a whole. Concepts that are used throughout are developed in the first chapters. Ideas developed in one chapter are often quietly echoed in a later one, so that there is a cumulative—and sometimes, inevitably, a repetitive—effect. Virtually all the notes at the end are non-substantive, consisting primarily of page references for quotations. Because I am tracing quite closely a series of related metaphors over a wide range, I have felt it necessary to give such references in order to allow the reader to have a look for himself. For the most part I have used inexpensive paperbacks to which the average reader will have ready access. The book does not really carry its analysis right up to modern writers, although the conclusion deals briefly with the twentieth century. Space was one consideration in this. The other is that I have already dealt with very similar matters in *The Protean Self: Dramatic Action in Contemporary Fiction*.

The book is dedicated to Walter Allen partly because he suggested that themes from the earlier book could be usefully applied to traditional fiction. It is dedicated to him primarily because of the work he has done for literature.

I am grateful to my colleagues Mike Klug and Bruce Stovel for reading parts of the manuscript and giving me the benefit of their opinions. Thanks to Colleen Clattenburg for speed and accuracy and long hours in typing.

I am also grateful to Laura Riding for permission to reproduce her poem 'Because of Clothes', from *The Collected Poems of Laura Riding*.

Much of Chapter 4 appeared in Volume III, Number 2 of *English Studies in Canada*.

Dalhousie University A.K.
July 1977

Because of Clothes

Without dressmakers to connect
The good-will of the body
With the purpose of the head,
We should be two worlds
Instead of a world and its shadow
The flesh.

The head is one world
And the body is another—
The same, but somewhat slower
And more dazed and earlier,
The divergence being corrected
In dress.

There is an odour of Christ
In the cloth: below the chin
No harm is meant. Even, immune
From capital test, wisdom flowers
Out of the shaded breast, and the thighs
Are meek.

The union of matter with mind
By the method of raiment
Destroys not our nakedness
Nor muffles the bell of thought.
Merely the moment to its dumb hour
Is joined.

Inner is the glow of knowledge
And outer is the gloom of appearance.
But putting on the cloak and cap
With only the hands and the face showing,
We turn the gloom in and the glow forth
Softly.

Wherefore, by the neutral grace
Of the needle, we possess our triumphs
Together with our defeats
In a single balanced couplement:
We pause between sense and foolishness,
And live.

Laura Riding

Contents

1 Significant Action and Cannibal Clothes

For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them.

Areopagitica

The belief that books are somehow active and infused with the intended meaning (or soul) of their authors is not a new one, as the passage from Milton shows. In fact, the belief that in reading a text—especially a fictional or poetic text—we are in communication with the personality of the author is a belief now so out of date as to deserve to be called old-fashioned. The 'intentional fallacy' argument (that an author's 'real' or original intention is irrecoverable from the text itself) dealt the first blow to this old-fashioned belief in the personal communicativeness of art and the structuralist study of texts is dealing the second. For the structuralists the personal element is beneath notice. The author has become the medium and language itself, or society, has become the author. Structuralists are interested in the way in which systems—systems of signs, or of economics, or of social structure—imprint themselves on individual texts despite the author's personal intent. From this point of view, the individual writer or reader of a text can be nothing but passive. The text writes its own author and creates its own reader.[1] Fashionable as such notions currently are, they too have quite a history and writers have probably always paid tribute either to afflatus or inspiration.[2] Intelligent readers have also discovered that the books they read and re-read often seem to understand them better than they understand the books. Milton's claim, of course, contains also this idea of passivity in the reference to the 'potency of life in them' which suggests the potentiality, as of a foetus, that will be active soon, but not yet. Books are 'not absolutely' dead things. Milton, however, in his old-fashioned way, has the emphasis right, on activity. And it is the emphasis one makes, or the assumptions one operates with, that are crucial to the degree of understanding one can achieve by analysis. To assume the passivity of the text is to blind oneself to a whole range of perceptions and meanings. In spite of the truth that there is an element of passivity in literature (a truth that will not be ignored below), it is essential at this time to re-assert the activity—the significant activity—of fiction.

The central force of this claim—that the novel is significantly active in the

world—is in opposition to the view that the novel is the bourgeois romantic epic, reflecting (passively, not critically) middle-class values and ultimately pandering to a middle-class desire for the quiet life. It denies, that is to say, that the novel is an insignificant and passive presence in the world. Similarly, the present argument will assert that characters in novels are not merely sentimental characters educated into accepting (again passively) a pre-defined position in established society. Characters in novels will be seen to grow towards an active engagement with their situations. Indeed, this is exactly what significant activity is. One can, of course, be active without being consciously and critically aware of the context (personal, social, historical) in which one acts. Although on such occasions we pay lip service of the 'out of the mouths of babes' variety to the fact that naive and uninformed activity may by some fluke of 'genius' be appropriate, it can be seen that on most occasions such activity will be insignificant; it won't count. Inversely, one may have a highly developed perceptive faculty, as well as accurate judgement and highly sensitive feelings, and maybe even philosophical expertise at one's subjective command. All of this personal potential will go for nought, however, if it is never realised in action. Its significance will be passive, and will ultimately atrophy. Significant action, then, results only from the interaction of subjectivity and objectivity.

The structural paradigm for all significant action in fiction comes from language itself; or, more precisely, from the active attempt to use language significantly. The meaning the writer feels he has within him as potential requires acting out in language in order to be fully significant. This significant action requires from the writer a peculiar degree of passivity. He cannot make the language do what it is not capable of doing; he must passively align himself with the fact that the ground of his action is given. If he does not, his action will remain insignificant because it is incommunicable. It will not exist in signs. Conversely, if he is merely passive, he will find that the language will betray him. He will use clichés, or dead or hollow expressions that will not convey exactly what he wishes to convey. Many novels—by means of what could be called the 'dyer's hand hypothesis'—show internal evidence of the author's necessary struggle with the forms of language. Some characters seem to exist only to give expression to the author's love of expression (Felix Holt's powerful ability as a speaker is an example of this). A character's struggle to make his own sense of the world significantly active in his own society is a transformation of the original struggle with the medium of language on the part of the author. The activity of writer, or character, turns out paradoxically to be a kind of passive activity, if it is significant. The paradoxical nature of fiction needs no stressing; it arises from the fact that fiction attempts to express the inexpressible. So it should not be surprising that fiction seeks to define a paradoxically passive action. The paradox seeks to point to a middle term that has been excluded by a dialectical pair. Coleridge indicates the pair of terms appropriate to the present discussion in the following passage:

> Few and unimportant would the errors of men be, if they did but know, first what they themselves mean: and secondly, what the *words* mean by which they attempt to convey their meaning.[3]

The interaction of these two meanings—which might be referred to as 'my meaning' and the 'world's meaning'—is dramatic and is itself the structural origin of the novel's continual fascination with the drama, another topic which is to be developed throughout this book. Owen Barfield develops the comment from Coleridge by differentiating between 'speaker's meaning' and 'lexical meaning'. Lexical, or dictionary meaning is the fixed or fossilised, mechanical, world's meaning. Poetry arises from the infusion of speaker's meaning into the lexical meaning. The rigid form of language is hollow and must be filled from the inside by the meaning of the speaker. Similarly the meaning of the speaker is not fully in the world until it is incarnated in words by an act of realisation. Barfield speaks of the pair of polar opposites 'expression' and 'communication' as coinciding in the poetic text (what I am calling the 'significant act'). Although the terms appear to be mutually exclusive, so that the more one expresses oneself the less will be communicated and vice versa, the essential relationship between the pairs is not, he says, quantitative but *dynamic*:

> This means that, though each of them is exclusive of, or counter to, the other, yet they are both concurrently necessary. They are, so to speak, 'sweet enemies.' And it is in this polarity that the depths of language are to be found. The two functions conflict, but they also co-operate. You can say, if you like, that the concern of communication is with the *how*, whereas the concern of expression is with the *what*. Perfect communication would occur if all words had and retained identical meanings every time they were uttered and heard. But it would occur at the expense of expression. In the same way, perfect individual or personal expression can only be achieved at the expense of communication, or at all events, at the expense of accuracy in communication.[4]

The active imagination expresses itself into the recalcitrant forms of language and the resultant creation is composite of polar opposites. The poetic text, then, is both expressive act and communicative fact; the action is suspended in the passive forms and the whole thing can become vital once again only by means of the interpretive activity of a reader, who must see beyond the surface forms to the informing sense. The implication of this fact is that the relationship of reader to text is also dynamic.

Earlier, mention was made of the possibility that passive text produced passivity in the reader. This was a loose way of putting the matter. One could say, in fact, that to the extent to which a text actively contains one meaning that it presents to the world, the reader is passive; he must be receptive to the message, the communication. This is the usual definition of

a 'classic'. Certain current attitudes reverse this relationship; for instance Frank Kermode in *The Classic* appears to argue that the 'classic' is that text which is richly passive in face of the active interpreter. Every generation finds its own meaning by interpreting in its own terms what the text 'means'. The 'classic' is the text which by one means or another contrives to be passive to the greatest number of successive generations of interpreters. Both these positions are denied by arguing that neither text nor reader is either wholly passive or active. In fact, the reader and the text are composed of those polar opposites: passivity and activity. Like writing, the art of reading or interpreting is a passive activity, or an active passivity. Unless we assume that the apparently objective and passive text has within it, as it were, an active subjectivity, we shall be misreading—and misreading is not a creative act, it is an offence against the 'sovereign ghost'.

The subjectivity of the text is not immediately accessible to us however. It is only *mediately* available to us, by means of signs, which require interpreting. Now, the implication of all of this is that amongst readers there will be different interpretations, and at the same time there will be general agreement as to what a text seems to mean. A classic, since we shall continue to have to use the term, is the text which means more than the words can contain; it means more than the words literally say. It speaks universally to all, and individually to each one; it is general and particular. A reader, by way of the surfaces of the signs, feels himself in touch with a 'meaning' which he cannot fully express except by pointing to the text itself. The subjective activity of the reader or interpreter will be significant in so far as it tests itself against the objectivity of the signs of the text; it must be related to its ground or be dismissed as overactive insignificance. Similarly, an inactive literal 'reading' of the text will not amount to a significant activity. One must always read beyond or between the lines. The most reassuring thing about these comments is that they square with what most intelligent readers and critics have always said about reading literature. They amount, that is to say, to a re-assertion of the common reader's beliefs about literature. One might be distressed at the lack of originality of an idea, but the validity of the thought is perhaps confirmed by seeing that it agrees with what most people think.

Writing, reading, speaking, then, are difficult activities precisely because they are mediated. The poet's struggle is to make the passive matter of the language coincide with the spirit of his meaning. As was suggested above, this tension or polarity is dramatic, and is the source of the novel's fascination with the drama. Shortly we shall consider how some of these ideas emerge from Shakespeare. Brice Parain confirms what has been said about the nature of the speaker's relationship to language in the following:

> Despite the monist prejudices of today . . . I see two faces to our consciousness, one turned outward which speaks and one linked with the most obscure of our personal, internal peculiarities which goes down to

> some roots there. I assume rather than am able to verify this one's existence because I have never been able to isolate it completely. But I know that not everything in us is reducible to language and that there is a part of us that seems to be silent and even resists language as freedom resists slavery. It is that part of us that is apparent in those unexpected, slightly foolish moments that overtake us.[5]

Further, and more to our purpose: 'To speak is an effort; it provokes disquiet; in short, it is work and too serious to be done easily. On the other hand, this duplicity is good. It is dramatic.'[6] What the novel does is to attempt to differentiate this essential duplicity from an inessential one that looks like it. The drama of confrontation of private and public, in language or in society, is an essential duplicity. One must be an *actor* in public, but this drama is good because it is significant. The freedom of our private reverie, which as Parain so aptly notes is often merely foolish, becomes significant freedom—or freedom under the law—only by enacting itself in public, mediately. Thought is only significant when it puts on the clothing of language. The danger is that the clothes will be mistaken for thought itself. Which is to say that another fundamental concern of the novel, that can be seen to arise from the structural matrix of the active use of language by the author, is the possibility of hypocrisy.

But we must back up briefly to mention the importance of the thought of Kenneth Burke, which becomes essential as soon as one begins to describe the world in dramatic terminology. Two fundamental principles of Burke's are relevant. The first is his dictum: 'Things move, people act.' The second is the fact that man is in essence a symbol user. When he does act, he acts in the field of his symbol system, and so it is possible to describe human nature as that which engages in 'symbolic action', or activity in, by and with symbols. Men can be moved of course, but the belief that people act suggests that humanity is only 'full' when free activity is possible. This free activity is obviously never unmediated; it is always presented to the world in some terminology or other. The interplay between intention and completed act is dramatic and for this reason the dramatic metaphor (as Burke argues in *Permanence and Change*, and elsewhere) is the most fundamental and profound metaphor available for us in attempting to account for human nature. It ought to be, then, that the history of the novel will reveal a recurrent interest in the drama, not only for literary historical reasons, but for what must be called structural ones. Whenever a fiction focuses on the interaction of several figures over any length of time and when, therefore, matters of signification are in evidence, there is bound to be a necessary recurrence of interest in the dramatic problems that centre around the subject of embodying meaning in symbols.

We know, from the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and from the many semiotic studies deriving from him, that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is an arbitrary one. There is no necessary reason

why any visual or oral symbols need carry one meaning. Indeed many identical sounds can convey one or many meanings. Syntax often serves to single out for us what particular 'signified' is intended, and so does context. Ambiguity is hard to avoid all the time, however. Here, then, is a central matter in the study of signification. In terms of the novel, several narrative possibilities derive from this fact of language, that is, from its arbitrariness. The first possibility is that language does work, particularly poetic language; all arbitrariness is overcome and the characters present themselves fully in their words: intention and sign coincide. Alternatively, there may be misinterpretation of the signs. A character may have a particular nature, as does Tom Jones say, but because of the tricksiness of signs he can be, and is, misrepresented and misinterpreted. The action of the novel (*Tom Jones*) then works towards a realignment of signified and signifiers. The two opposites to the previous situations are both contained in the single situation of hyprocrisy. The hyprocrite is possible only because of the arbitrariness of signs; he relies on misinterpretation, even though he intends the interpretation received when he is successful in his presentation. The intention of the hyprocrite is a surface one only; it is in a sense a hollow intention. He intends a manipulation of the surface of signifiers so as to suggest that, possibly, he is a trustworthy man when in fact he is not. In this case the signifier is hollow. It does its job and yet if one could somehow see beneath the surface of the hyprocrite, see below the costume he wears to put on his act, one would find an absolute discrepancy between signifier and signified. The novel often is concerned with cases of mistaken identity and its action often attempts to set up ways in which the hollow word can be differentiated from the full one. Because one of its fundamental principles is that men act in symbols, and that they must engage in symbolic action or be incomplete, the novel must often recur to the question of hyprocrisy (which is a term deriving originally from the stage). Further, it is clear that relatedness in novels is primarily a matter of interpretation between individuals. Love is a stage of relatedness at which words (or signs) become meaningful.

The argument thus far has suggested that certain forms of fiction are inherent in language itself; or rather, to be more precise, that the active *use* of language offers us analogues to what we find in fiction. It is in the interaction between what I have called 'intention', or signified, and the forms of language that the tension is originated that informs the novel. Continental structuralists, particularly Tzvetan Todorov,[7] have argued that the forms of language themselves give rise to the forms of fiction. This I take to be a passive theory of derivation—or a theory of passive derivation. The forms of fiction, according to this passive theory, are merely the forms of language writ large. This kind of structuralist thought is not one I wish to be thought to be allied with—unless, as is very possible, I misinterpret it. Although language is made by men, it is not made by individual men, and the pre-structuring attitude inherent in Todorov's suggestion seems to leave out what I take to be all-important: the necessary activity on the part of

the author who is attempting to signify. In arguing that the novel reveals a structural consistency, I mean to suggest that because the situation in which men attempt to act significantly, or to act by signifying, is one which recurs identically over and over, there is bound to be some evidence of different individuals having achieved the same use of 'elements' of structure in their work. Todorov's idea is a very suggestive one nevertheless. The periodic sentence, for instance, in which ultimate predication is delayed until near the very end of the sentence, could well be thought to be an originating form for some forms of fiction. The story of *Oedipus Rex* is obviously the story of a life told in the form of a periodic sentence, as is the story of *Tom Jones*. It is not because we are subject to a structuring tendency on the part of language, however, that we find that human history has produced similar forms. The structural similarities arise from the fact that men always, because of their active nature, attempt to create structures of signification. Such structures are achieved, rather than imposed.

There is a cluster of situations and attitudes that can be derived, up to a point, by means of a deductive analysis of the nature of language use. Only by means of particular analytic investigation will the point become fully clear, and I mean shortly to turn to particular poetic structures for analysis. Before getting into extended analysis, however, it might be useful to suggest briefly how 'significant action' occurs in a few works. Richardson's *Clarissa* is the story of a pure but misrepresented soul, who suffers because of the plots of the arch-hyprocrite, Lovelace. Lovelace's extremely active use, or misuse, of signals turns out ultimately to be insignificant in the face of the apparently passive but ultimately more effectively active soul of Clarissa Harlowe. This novel will be considered in more detail in Chapter 3, but one might just note in passing that the essential goal of envisioning the unity of the private and social sides of character in the novel is here split into two. Clarissa is pure soul, misrepresented by society. For the nineteenth-century novel, soul is seen as something which grows, which evolves and requires both education (drawing out) and culture. This growing soul must itself struggle with the medium of representation and is itself often responsible—because of a lack of projective activity—for its own misunderstanding. The Clarissa version of purity misrepresented by forces outside its control does not disappear of course, as is evidenced by Collins' *The Woman in White* which is another study in the way in which the hypocritical villain (Fosco) manipulates surface appearances in order to betray the pure soul (of Laura), by representing her to be the insane woman in white, Anne Catherick. Based at least in part on the premise that 'crime causes its own detection', *The Woman in White* shows how a deep concern for the Truth, and for Innocence, will ultimately prevail against theatrical manipulation of surface appearance. Along the way there may well be disasters, but they contrive to happen to dispensable characters like Anne Catherick. Laura suffers a brief and traumatic (but not lasting or permanently damaging, we may imagine) incarceration in a madhouse, but the

novel ends when the proper detective work has been done by Walter Hartright. Walter, as his name indicates, finds meaning below the surface, in the heart, and he struggles to make this deep meaning come to the top in order to rewrite the appearance of things. The novel ends symbolically with the erroneous writing on the tombstone being chipped off and the proper writing being inscribed in its place. Correct writing is possible, it turns out, and the theatrical hypocrisy of such as Fosco can be overcome by active attention both to the surface clues and to what cannot yet be seen.

By contrast, Mr F's aunt, in *Little Dorrit*, has had her heart go wrong at some time, and therefore, as violently active as she sometimes is in her insane speechifying, she never makes any sense. So little does she signify as a human being, that at one point she is in danger of being made into meat pies—just one instance of Dickens's interest in cannibalism; having lost that which gives language significance, Mr F's aunt is just so much meat. Flora Casby, whose mistake it is to try to make dead romance appear on a new stage, has a deeply confused and silly heart and therefore her syntax is out of control. As the impulses of her heart have become confused, lost somewhere between past and future, so they have lost projective power and language itself seems to have caught her up and is rolling her through the rest of her days like a juggernaut. Mrs Clennam is very significant in terms of the story in that she has tremendous effect on the lives around her. She is active only in a wilful or mechanical sense, however, and her ultimate inactivity of soul is indicated by her paralysis. It is only when the frozen sea within her is thawed by Little Dorrit that she becomes a full human being again, briefly, and moves from her wheelchair. The apparently passive Dorrit is revealed to be capable of a greater activity after all. The pattern for this type of insignificantly active character (like Mrs Clennam) seems to have been created by Jane Austen, especially in the figure of Mrs Norris in *Mansfield Park*. Her spirit of activity is that of a superficial busybody, and when really called on to act significantly she is paralysed. Emma, one might say, is a benign version of Mrs Norris, one who does have the potential for sensible development. Her overactivity, in matchmaking and imagining, is inappropriate to the setting in which she finds herself and is therefore, at the least, insignificant—although certainly productive of error, misunderstanding and pain. Fanny Price, on the other hand, is capable of accurate judgement and has an inner significance, but she is too inactive; she does not project her significance into the world. Anne Elliott, whose word has no weight, is similar.

Conrad's Lord Jim moves from a state of passivity, or paralysis caused by excessive imaginative activity, to a condition of vital activity in Patusan. On the training ship, the activity of his imagination seems to blind him to the real situation outside him, the potential ground of activity, and so cripple him for significant action. Because Jim has something of value inside him, Conrad and Marlow are willing to suspend belief in the value of a fixed code of conduct and follow Jim into the world of his second chance, a world

dominated by suggestions of a dreamlike, subjective quality; as if, even if Jim were to succeed in Patusan in proving himself, somehow the achievement would be still potential, not, somehow, having occurred in the real, or public, world. The whole of his heroic achievement in Patusan is indeed clouded by the doubt that it is insignificant, that it does not count because in a sense he has not yet worked in the ranks. One must remember that the special friend who says to Marlow that one must work in the ranks or one's life doesn't count is a racist. He believes that giving one's life up to them, '(*them* meaning all of mankind with skins brown, yellow, or black in colour) "was like selling your soul to a brute"'. He contends further that relationship with *them* is '"only endurable and enduring when based on a firm conviction in the truth of ideas racially our own, in whose name are established the order, the morality of an ethical progress"'. To all of which Marlow offers the enigmatic comment 'Possibly!' One significance, in this context, of Jim's life is the implicit defeat of racism that it represents. He stands before the court of his peers after the Patna affair, but clearly his appearance is intended as a denial of the authority of that court. Brierly seems to read this implied message and commits suicide, presumably having seen the flaw in the system to which he has been loyal. By contrast, Jim presents himself to Doramin, after the death of Dain Waris, and again apparently passive as he accepts the judgement, one can sense that he actively affirms Doramin's right to judge him. The court of *them* is proved to be as deserving of respect—perhaps more deserving—than that of civilised Europe. The nagging doubt that surrounds Jim's life is not forgotten even at the moment when he may be morally affirming the unity of mankind, however. We are reminded that he may still be betraying both himself, and the love of Jewel—who believes him to have been false, to have run away from her—for a shadowy ideal of conduct.

Racism is an important subject in *Lord Jim*, as it is in *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow, in *Heart of Darkness*, reluctantly begins to admit his common humanity with the howling savages of the jungle. Jim, with little apparent reluctance, affirms this common humanity, and judges himself guilty when he breaks faith with humanity and causes the death of Dain Waris. All this is very fine, but the claim of the privileged friend has an insistent truth about it. Jim's life, in itself, is insignificant; it doesn't count because it is not Doramin who needs to learn a lesson about racism; it is not Doramin who needs to have his common humanity demonstrated to him. Jim's moral activity would only have significance if performed in Europe; that is the ground on which—or the medium by means of which—one has to demonstrate the universality of humanity. The irony of Jim's life, of course, is that that is precisely the ground which has been cut from under him. His act is insignificant then because it occurs in the wrong setting, on the wrong stage. It is left to Conrad, and Marlow, to give Jim's meaning significance. It is Marlow who completes, or realises Jim's meaning by telling, like the ancient mariner, the story in Europe. Under the pressure of the elusive

meaning of Jim's life, Marlow, like Jim, is tormented into 'a meticulous precision of statement [that] would bring out the true horror behind the appalling face of things', and Conrad, having caught a glimpse of Jim's original, says that 'It was for me, with all the sympathy of which I was capable, to seek fit words for his meaning.' Marlow's (and Conrad's) words would have no significance were it not for that intuition of the hidden life (the sovereign ghost) to which they point and direct our attention; and the ghost could never be actual were it not for the words.

It is not surprising to find novelists concerned with action and passion. Not all, however, show the kind of philosophical concern about the implications of this pair of terms for identity and society as does someone like Conrad, or like George Eliot, who offers the following bit of theatrical dialogue as a lead-in to Chapter 64 of *Middlemarch*:

> 1st Gent. Where lies the power, there let the blame lie too.
> 2nd Gent. Nay, power is relative; you cannot fright
> The coming pest with border fortresses,
> Or catch your carp with subtle argument.
> All force is twain in one: cause is not cause
> Unless effect there be; and action's self
> Must needs contain a passive. So command
> Exists but with obedience.

Not of least interest is the dramatic form of the passage, for Eliot is aware that an interest in activity is in itself an interest in dramatic action. *Daniel Deronda* and *Middlemarch* are studies in the meaning of significant action, which is action that has an effect. The philosophical problems of cause and effect need to be quietly circumvented if we are to get the point. Unless there is some visible public impact on environment (or scene, or stage), then there has been no 'action' in the sense Eliot seems to be trying to define. A productive passivity in action arises from taking the environment of one's activity into account. One must be passive in order to perceive clearly what is taking place outside of one's imagination. Only with realistic clarity of perception of the otherness of the grounds of one's action is there a chance for that action to be significant. Gwendolen Harleth of *Daniel Deronda* is highly active, theatrically active, but she is doomed to ineffectuality and insignificance because she is blind to the real state of affairs in which she moves. In fact, she is often wilfully blind, choosing not to understand her situation, as in the matter of the warning given her by Lydia Glasher. In *The Portrait of a Lady* Isabel Archer, who is modelled on Gwendolen, learns how to make her life significant, for Pansy, by actively choosing a life of passivity as wife of Osmond. Indeed, James's America-Europe theme could be schematised using our present terminology. America offers energetic actors without a stage suitable for their best acts, while Europe offers, by contrast, a highly active stage (or cultural setting) in which the actors have become