

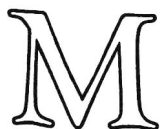
# NOVELISTS — ON — NOVELISTS

*Edited by David Dowling*



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Edited by  
David Dowling



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# Introduction

In 1913, Arnold Bennett met Henry James and recorded the encounter in his journal: 'Very slow talker. Beautiful French. Expressed stupefaction when I said I knew nothing about the middle-class, and said the next time he saw me he would have recovered from the stupefaction, and the discussion might proceed. Said there was too much to say about everything – and that was the thing most felt by one such as he, not entirely without – er – er – er – perceptions. When I said I lay awake at nights sometimes thinking of the things I had left out of my novels, he said that all my stuff was crammed, and that when the stuff was crammed nothing more could be put in, and so it was all right. He spoke with feeling about his recent illness. "I have been very ill". . . . An old man, waning, but with the persistent youthfulness that all old bachelors have.'<sup>1</sup>

In 1928, to commemorate the birth of George Meredith a hundred years before, Thomas Hardy wrote of him: 'Some of his later contemporaries and immediate successors certainly bear the marks of his style and outlook, particularly in respect of *The Comic Spirit*, most of them forgetting, as he did not forget (though he often conveniently veiled his perception of it), that, as I think Ruskin remarks, "Comedy is Tragedy if you only look deep enough". The likelihood is that, after some years have passed, what was best in his achievement – at present partly submerged by its other characteristics – will rise still more distinctly to the surface than it has done already. Then he will not only be regarded as a writer who said finest and profoundest things often in a tantalising way, but as one whose work remains as an essential portion of the vast universal volume which enshrines as contributors all those that have adequately recorded their reading of life.'<sup>2</sup>

And in 1853, while staying in Dessein's Hotel in Calais, Thackeray noticed a portrait of Sterne on the wall marking the

room the earlier novelist had slept in. Thackeray wrote in a letter: 'He seems to say, "You are right. I was a humbug: and you, my lad, are you not as great?" Come come, Mr Sterne, none of these tu quoques – some of the London papers are abusing me as hard as ever I assaulted you.'<sup>3</sup>

I have chosen these three extracts as peripheral yet eloquent examples of the underlying premise of this collection: that what British novelists have to say about each other provides a veritable banquet for thought about the history of the novel, about the works and personality of the novelist under discussion, and no less about the works and personality of the originator of the comments. In the Bennett extract, what assumptions are revealed obliquely in each novelist about the relationship between the novel and class structures? How do we square the conception of the novel as a suitcase to be packed tight, with James's theories of the novel; to what ironies of the master is Bennett quite impervious? In his eulogy, what light does Hardy's reading of the 'comic' element in Meredith shed on his own novels? And if Thackeray lamented the 'jester' in Sterne (see Sterne, 16), does he nevertheless take some pride in the contemporary attacks on the authorial presence in his own novels?

These are just some of the issues raised by such deceptively casual commentary. What these three extracts (each in a different register and relationship) also display, either implicitly or – in the case of Hardy – explicitly, is a sense of the 'common pursuit' of novel-writing. Like players in a sports team, what unites the twenty-two widely disparate personalities represented in this collection is the shared activity of creating novels. But also, unlike all but the most fanatical sportsman, these novelists share the belief that novels are an essential part both of man's personal development (in the reading of novels) and of his general cultural achievement (in their creation). Yet the creation of works of art and the forming of judgement upon them – and to an even greater extent upon their creators – are highly individual activities. Hardy's expression neatly captures this paradoxical, invigorating tension – between the common goal and the individual means, between the belief and the practice, between the 'universal volume' and the particular 'reading of life' – which is constantly revealed, consciously and unconsciously, in this book.

My desire for a collection of this sort sprang originally from

the experience of teaching a succession of 'History of the Novel' courses to undergraduates, and sensing that many of the accepted overviews did not seem important to the students' first experiences of these books. That crucial little word 'rise' in Ian Watt's admirable study suggests that we in the late twentieth century have a privileged position — albeit perhaps at the graveside of the novel's 'death' — from which to view the genre's rise and fall. But this privileged viewpoint depends on broad and sophisticated knowledge; it also, I believe, should constitute a transitional stage between that initial raw encounter of reader and writer, and the equally immediate but more leisurely, more deeply pleasurable, lifelong acquaintance of an appreciative friend. Students of the novel are faced with a larger version of the conflict which Arnold Kettle exposed within the novel form itself, between 'pattern' and 'process'. Encouraged to 'place' a number of novels in an intelligible system, the student may be in danger of eschewing the immediate response of 'process' for one of several attractive patterns available through modern criticism. While these patterns arose out of, and are usually exemplified by, the supremely sensitive encounters between the critic and his novels, those processes may be lost sight of in the rush to catalogue and comprehend.

Moreover, novel criticism has reached such a degree of sophistication (or is it perhaps surfeit?) that much contemporary discussion amounts to 'Meta-criticism', so abstract as to seem to those not as deeply immersed in the materials of their subject as the protagonists, arid and even irrelevant. I think of a recent debate in the journal *Novel* between Malcolm Bradbury on the side of 'structure', and David Lodge on the side of language. In that series of articles Wayne Booth observed in his usual ingenious way: 'Must we forever rush through all these [critical] books, demolishing each man's shelter to provide materials for our own?'<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf voiced the same complaint in 1925 when she said, 'What these scholars want is to get at books through writing books, not through reading them.'<sup>5</sup>

Of course, particularly in recent years, various critics have sought to bring attention back to the primary fact of reading, by writing books about reading books. In 1923 Percy Lubbock wrote in *The Craft of Fiction*: 'The reader of a novel . . . is himself a novelist.'<sup>6</sup> This idea has reached sophisticated expression in the work of critics such as Wayne Booth ('If [the author]



makes [his readers] well . . . he finds his reward in the peers he has created'),<sup>7</sup> the German Wolfgang Iser who talks about 'the dynamic process of recreation',<sup>8</sup> and the French critic Georges Poulet ('L'acte de lire [auquel se ramène toute vraie pensée critique] implique la coïncidence de deux consciences: celle d'un lecteur et celle d'un auteur').<sup>9</sup> Through such approaches, critics return to the source and heart of the novel experience.

Partly because they were not professionals or teachers of a 'discipline', partly because many of their comments were contained in the casual form of diary entries or letters, the novelists represented here often deliver their judgments in the white heat of reading, or immediately afterwards while the coal still glows. Often they commit the acts of subjectivism and inconsistency which we will not allow the critic; and their reactions are the more intriguing for it. Besides, there operates always the principle of reflexive significance, whereby a novelist reveals as much about his own prejudices, practices and aspirations in his judgments as he explicates those of his subject.

Another fact which makes the comments of novelists valuable is that, unlike many critics, they are trying to practise what they preach. As Percy Lubbock observed, 'It is when the novel is seen in the process of its making that the dignity of the craft, if ever it was questioned, is fully restored to it.'<sup>10</sup> A participant in another recent symposium on 'The State of Criticism' defended the special knowledge and bias of the critic as involved creator: 'The primary paradigm of criticism is actually one performed by people who are creating works in the same genre.'<sup>11</sup> One might capitalise on the ambiguity of this statement to suggest that not only the comments but the novels of these novelists are a commentary on what they have read (*Shamela* is only the most crude example of this). Indeed, this idea would seem to be inevitable in psychological terms, as Virginia Woolf observed: 'Books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately.'<sup>12</sup>

This brings me to another reason why I feel a collection such as this one is valuable. Virginia Woolf's sense of 'continuance' is shared by all these novelists, Joyce's protestations to the contrary (see the epigraph to his section), as evidenced in the sheer fact that they read each other. For clarification of the concept of literary tradition in modern criticism we must go, of course, to T. S. Eliot's essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'.

There Eliot addresses both the creator and the critic: the one must 'procure the consciousness of the past', the other must set the artist, 'for contrast and comparison, among the dead'. In this collection we see the novelist accomplishing both feats simultaneously. Comparisons are continually being made between writers and groups of writers, a fact which the arrangement of quotations under the individual author mentioned disguises somewhat. Writers such as Scott, Thackeray, Lawrence, Woolf and Forster wrote series of essays on past novelists to test their own creative assumptions. The extent to which all the novelists read to 'procure' the past is also evident, although an inclusion of other novelists (not only from the British tradition), every mention of a writer, or the ubiquitous quotation from other novels, would increase this sense.

T. S. Eliot's reconciliation of the tradition with the new is well known. When he says '*novelty* is better than repetition', we are reminded simply by the words he uses of the importance of this reconciliation in regard to the particular genre of the novel. F. R. Leavis, at the beginning of *The Great Tradition*, clarifies the situation in terms similar to those of Eliot, but at greater length. First he identifies the problem: 'What one great original artist learns from another, whose genius and problems are necessarily very different, is the hardest kind of "influence" to define.' Then he devises for himself a neat exit: 'One of the supreme debts one great writer can owe another is the realisation of unlikeness.' The problems for a literary critic when working only with the created novels can become a tangle of slight semantic shifts and tautologies, as I believe they do when Leavis considers the indebtedness of *The Portrait of a Lady* to *Daniel Deronda* — which is both real and illusory. Reference to the critical comments of a novelist may at least clarify, if not completely identify, the nature of an influence. We may see what particular elements of an author are picked up by the later novelist, as well as which elements are rejected. Again, as I said before, critical comments often rebound to illuminate the commentator. One must always remember Lawrence's cautionary dictum to 'trust the tale, not the teller'; but novelists, like ordinary people, are often never so revealing about their own values as when they judge those of others, in which case the teller becomes as intriguing as his tale.

An appropriate emblem for this book, as for the literary tra-



dition as a whole, can be found in E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*:

We cannot consider fiction by periods, we must not contemplate the stream of time. Another image better suits our powers: that of all the novelists writing their novels at once . . . all the novelists are at work together in a circular room.<sup>13</sup>

To extend this rather austere image, one might imagine the novelist every so often taking a sidelong glance at what his neighbour has written or is writing, and continuing his novel or his critical commentary accordingly. The image is not unique to Forster (we have already met Hardy's 'universal volume', and Virginia Woolf in *Jacob's Room* imagines the British Museum as 'an enormous mind'), but it does help to emphasise the sense of human fellowship, the community of readers as well as the community which constitutes the tradition, which the novelist feels so acutely. For the British Museum is also a library, and these novelists are constantly leaving their seats to fetch down a volume by someone across the table. As much as they are aware of the common pursuit and the common tradition, they are aware of the astonishing variety of human experience; that they each sit (to alter the image slightly) at only one of the many windows of the house of fiction. It is not surprising that in our age of relativity another library has become popular, 'The Library of Babel' in the story by Borges.<sup>14</sup> This library 'is a sphere whose exact centre is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible'. I am not sure of the precise meaning of Borges's teasing allegory, but details of it may provide an equally appropriate emblem for this book. These novelists are, like the inhabitants of the Library of Babel, searchers after 'a clarification of humanity's basic mysteries'; but only the most unadventurous of them (Richardson, for example, or Trollope) believe that there is one circumference to be found. These are like Borges's 'eliminators', searching for the one book and eliminating all others. But the comments of most of these novelists are the record of their continual surprisings by the varieties of moral and aesthetic truths. They may retain an ideal of the great or perfect novel, but when they arrive, as Borges puts it, 'they speak of a broken stairway which almost killed them'.

While my intention is for the novelists literally to speak for themselves in the following pages, I would like to make some points here of general interest. First, it should become apparent that unlike many professional critics these novelists, being word-smiths themselves, naturally describe their subjects in elaborate and occasionally fanciful images. When James calls *Waverley* a 'self-forgetful' novel (Scott, 29), when Woolf describes Forster's various gifts as tripping him up (Forster, 29), or when Bennett describes Trollope as driving at a constant four miles per hour over a straight Roman road (Trollope, 3), we are given images or icons of the novelist and the novel which often sum up and memorialise an elaborate argument. Often, as in the last example, these images serve to date the criticism. Notable here is the image of electricity, for example, James talking of Meredith as 'throwing out lights' (Meredith, 18), or Trollope talking of Scott's 'twenty horse power vivacity' (Scott, 38).

The most ubiquitous critical requirement of a novel is, of course, that it must have 'life', however much the vagueness of that word is stressed and explored in the extended discussions of James, Forster and Woolf. The second requirement, which became apparent in the original work of Defoe and the subsequent arguments of Fielding and Richardson, is 'morality'. Whether it surfaces in the crude but consistent form of Trollope's concern for the young female Victorian reader, or in the sophisticated form of George Eliot's lament over Dickens (Dickens, 10), the moral expectations and convictions of the reader are revealed here with a vigour and candour refreshing in an age of steadfastly impartial 'academic' criticism.

Nowhere is the communal yet deeply personal business of novel-reading more obvious than in the question of sex. Sex rears its fascinating head again and again: in the censure of *Tom Jones* by Richardson and Scott; in Thackeray's sly imputations that Charlotte Brontë was a frustrated spinster (Brontë, 19); in James's equally sly suggestions about the suppressed sadism in Thackeray's treatment of Blanche Amory and his other villainous heroines (Thackeray, 25); in Woolf's feminist anger at Dickens the archetypal male (Dickens, 44); and even in the attribution of a 'feminine' style by Bennett to Woolf (Woolf, 3), or by Bennett and James to George Eliot (Eliot, 1 and 6). Sex is a fascinating subject because it slithers between the characters of the novel, the feel of the novel as a whole, and the personality

of its author. From Dickens's delighted unveiling of the identity of George Eliot to the boisterousness of Joyce and the politicalisations of Lawrence, the sexual element has been central in the criticism of these novelists.

On this frankly personal level, too, we may find Dickens matching his own career against that of Scott (Scott, 16 and 17), or George Eliot fearing a personal wound from any criticism of that same author (Scott, 24). We see Lawrence using Forster to clarify his own problems, or Woolf dismissing James (James, 31) and Joyce (Joyce, 21) because of their lack of English breeding. The accounts of the various friendships underline the great amount and wide variety of direct personal contact which went on between these novelists, and the uses to which these friendships were put were as many and varied as in ordinary life.

On the aesthetic level as well these novelists have much to say. At one end we find Bennett's deceptively crude, pragmatic considerations — for example, that life is too short for *Clarissa* (Richardson, 2); at the other end we see the refining of an aesthetic in action, as James grows disillusioned with Trollope or rises to the challenge of George Eliot. James and Woolf, of course, stand out as critics because of the acuity of their perceptions and because they were ready to encounter and formulate new aesthetics. Woolf's battle with Lawrence makes fascinating reading; and she is always exploring the craft of fiction, as in her superb analysis of Scott which begins with the personality and ends with a consideration of the place of direct speech in fiction (Scott, 43).

A final word should be said about the limits of this book and its use. I cannot claim to be exhaustive: first, because I have already selected the most clearly judgmental comments from those available; secondly, because I have consulted only published sources (although the magnificent work of the editors of letters, journals and criticism on whose backs I rest gives me confidence that the record is fairly complete); and thirdly, because some letters, such as those of Woolf, Hardy, Lawrence and Conrad, are still in the process of publication. Because of these limitations, it would be dangerous to assume that because there is no entry for a novelist, he either did not read or did not comment on another novelist. On the other hand, I feel that most of the comments which the authors felt were important to them will by now have found their way into print.

I have deliberately kept the annotations and the quotations pared to a bare outline. Further context may be found by consulting the sources, but I believe I have not distorted the meaning or intention of any quotation. With some extended essays, such as those of James, Lawrence and Woolf, it was difficult to edit without losing some of the flavour of a developing argument. However, I wanted always to retain the virtues of juxtaposition (so that one may see clearly, for example, that Lawrence found Hardy a non-tragic, and Woolf found him a tragic, writer) and concision. I have favoured the judgmental statement over the descriptive or plot summary.

By arranging the book by novelist, I hope to have assembled, by one reading, a series of composite portraits; by another reading, using the numbered and alphabeticised headings, one may trace the pattern of likes and dislikes of one particular novelist. One may also explore cross-references, discovering perhaps that while A liked B, B did not like A; or that while C and D admired E, they differed in their opinion of F.

The choice of novelists is inevitably personal, although I have included the major figures in the accepted histories of the English novel, as well as two 'common touchstones' in Trollope and Bennett. Considerations of size and congestion precluded a host of peripheral novelists such as Mrs Gaskell, Stevenson, Wells, etc.

There have been other collections of historical criticism of the novel, of course, but none limited to a self-referring circle. Kenneth Graham's *English Criticism of the Novel 1865-1900* (1965) presents minor reviewers, as does the *Critical Heritage* series (Routledge & Kegan Paul) — although it also includes some major items. Richard Stang's *The Theory of the Novel in England 1850-70* (1959) and Miriam Allott's *Novelists on the Novel* (1959) both take a genre approach. The latter book is closest to my own; indeed, the preface begins, 'Only the practitioner can speak with final authority about the problems of his art' (xv). But the arrangement by subject, under such headings as 'The Novel and the Marvellous', makes occasionally for dislocated reading. And R. B. Johnson's *Novelists on Novels* (1928) is an odd assortment of early, minor novelists.

Terence wrote, *Quot homines tot sententiae: suo quoque mos* ('So many people, so many opinions, his own a law to each'). Looking into the minds of our twenty-two novelists seated in their circular room, one may be struck immediately by

the truth of that aphorism. But to dwell with them for a time is to be reminded of another saying, by Milton in *Areopagitica*: 'Opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making.' By reading the opinions of our great novelists, we can understand the nature and maturing of their individual talents: at the same time, we can understand the tradition more completely.

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# Jane Austen, 1775-1817

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<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	1813
<i>Mansfield Park</i>	1814
<i>Emma</i>	1815
<i>Northanger Abbey</i>	1818
<i>Persuasion</i>	1818

‘Oh! it is only a novel!’ . . . or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.

*Northanger Abbey*, ch. 5

