The Theory of the NOVEL in ENGLAND 1850-1870

Richard Stang

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INTRODUCTION

ONE of the most persistent clichés in the history of modern literature, especially the history of the English novel, is that criticism of the novel and discussions of the theory of the novel somehow began *ex nihilo* with Flaubert in France, and that England remained remarkably insulated from these theories until infected or fertilized (depending on one's point of view) by either Henry James or George Moore in the eighties. Until that decade, or for some writers until the late seventies, the English novelist did not consider himself an artist at all; he was merely a popular entertainer. In England, it was not until the modern critics (James was a lonely precursor) 'determined above all to grant their novelists seriousness, and to take the novel seriously, to take it, that is to say, not as amusement but as art' that there was any criticism of the novel at all, according to Mark Schorer.[1] Walter Allen, in the most recent history of the English novel, also states quite categorically that 'the notion of the novel as a literary form having something to do with art . . . is quite new'—that is, this notion begins not earlier than the last two decades of the nineteenth century—and that novelists until quite recently 'interpreted their craft in no very exalted way'.[2]

These misconceptions about the history of the theory of the novel are not confined to men who consider themselves primarily critics relying for their literary history and scholarship upon others. Bradford Booth, a specialist in the nineteenth-

[1] John W. Aldridge, ed., *Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction 1920–1951* (New York, 1952), p. xv.

[2] *The English Novel, a Short Critical History* (New York, 1955), p. xxi.

century novel, writes that in the mid-nineteenth century, criticism of fiction 'remained in its adolescence', marked by 'jaunty and complacent superficiality'. At least Professor Booth concedes us some criticism, even if adolescent (for with other writers on the subject, it is usually childish or non-existent), but he goes on to say that for significant criticism we had to wait 'until the influence of Henry James had made itself felt. For this unhappy state of affairs the novelists were largely responsible, for they regarded their craft as a form of amusement rather than an art.' Even George Eliot, actually a highly self-conscious artist, as we shall see later, remained for Booth in this state of 'critical innocence'. She 'approached criticism, briefly and tentatively', and 'none of the other first-rate novelists made any contribution towards the establishment of a theory of fiction' except Trollope, who, we are told, had 'fixed principles'.[1] According to Desmond Pacey, who investigated Victorian criticism of prose fiction carefully to do his study, 'Flaubert and His Victorian Critics', in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 'the novel had been regarded largely as an instrument of superior amusement or of moral elevation; reviews of novels had been but slightly concerned with matters of style and technique, and articles devoted to a discussion of the art of the novel had been unknown',[2] until of course, again, the miraculous eighties. At least Dr. Pacey grants that the amusement afforded by the Victorian novel was superior; for Ford Madox Ford it was a very low form called 'nuvvles',[3] as distinguished from the novel, a work of art.

To quote from only one more sample, to show how widespread this view is, Robert Gorham Davis, writing in the 'Forum on Realism', edited by Harry Levin and filling a whole issue of *Comparative Literature* in 1951, states authoritatively: 'Between the first two and last two decades of the nineteenth century, there was amazingly little extended or serious discussion of the novel as a literary form, either by English critics or by the English novelists themselves. Thackeray's *British Humourists* is hardly an exception.'[4]

[1] 'Trollope on the Novel,' *Essays Critical and Historical Dedicated to Lily B. Campbell* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1950), pp. 219–20.

[2] XVI (1946), 83.

[3] *The English Novel* (London, 1930), pp. 105–8.

[4] III, 214.

This study will deal with discussions of the novel as a distinct literary form in the years between 1850 and 1870. The time span, however, will be somewhat elastic and include statements by all novelists whose important work falls into this period. Thus the statements by Thackeray, Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton, and Charlotte Brontë, even if they are made in the thirties and forties, will be considered relevant, and those by Meredith, Trollope, and George Eliot, when falling into the seventies and eighties, will also be included. Critics like R. H. Hutton and Leslie Stephen, whose preoccupations remain those of the fifties and sixties, but whose work extends into the seventies and eighties, will not be cut short at the year 1869, for to do so would seem artificial. On the other hand, the ideas of Henry James, Thomas Hardy, George Moore, and George Gissing, since their novels belong definitely to a later period, will be excluded.

In this period, any study of the theory of the novel, or, for that matter, of the theory of poetry, cannot limit itself, as it could in the succeeding period 1870–1914, merely to matters of technique and form. Such matters were indeed important to the Victorians, but as E. S. Dallas, one of the most original literary theorists of the period, wrote: 'After all, the question of supreme interest in art, the question upon which depends our whole interest in art is, what are its relations to life.' [1] Questions such as the use of fiction, the role of the imagination in the writing of fiction, and the correspondence of fiction to life outside the novel were as central to the mid-Victorian novelist, critic and educated reader as more strictly formal questions are to us.

In this book I shall try to show that mid-Victorian criticism of fiction has been very much underrated, that it should be considered as an important part of the history of English criticism as a whole, and that it must further be considered in any study of the mutations of the English novel. The chief reason for the wholesale dismissal of this large literature is that most of it is buried away in the files of Victorian periodicals. On the whole, the most trenchant discussions are not those published in books, and it is unfortunate for the reputation of Victorian criticism that such books as Thackeray's *British Humourists*,

[1] Eneas Sweetland Dallas, *The Gay Science* (London, 1866), II, 287.

which has many excellent qualities, although criticism is not one of them; Trollope's *Autobiography*, wonderfully frank but not very intelligent critically; and a few others, such as Cross' expurgated edition of George Eliot's *Letters and Journals*, together with a few prefaces to novels, have been the basis of too many considerations of the entire subject of the mid-Victorian theory of the novel. The brilliant discussions of the technique and subject matter of novels and the relation of novels to life by such major critics as G. H. Lewes, Walter Bagehot, R. H. Hutton, W. C. Roscoe, Leslie Stephen, George Eliot (or Miss Evans, as she was when sub-editor of the *Westminster Review* and prolific critic from 1851 to 1857 before publishing her first novel), and a host of vigorous minor critics, such as George Brimley, James Fitzjames Stephen, Samuel Lucas, E. S. Dallas—all of these discussions are still unknown even though they appeared in such important periodicals as the *Cornhill Magazine*, the *North British Review*, the *British Quarterly Review*, the *Westminster Review*, the *National Review*, the *Saturday Review*, and the *Leader*.

Since there has not yet been any adequate account of mid-Victorian criticism of the major literary form of the mid-Victorian period, I hope this book will supply a much-needed missing chapter in English literary history.

I would like to thank Professors Jerome H. Buckley, Frederic W. Dupee and Susan Nobbe of Columbia University, and Professor Charles Shain of Carleton College for their valuable criticism. I am especially grateful to Professor Buckley for his close reading of my manuscript and his many careful corrections. But my chief thanks are to my wife for her indispensable help at every stage of my work.

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CONTENTS

PART THREE

PART ONE

I

THE SACRED OFFICE

The Novelists

I. THE BACKGROUND

FRANCIS JEFFREY, having selected in 1842 what seemed to him his most significant critical essays to preserve for posterity from the pages of the *Edinburgh Review*, felt it necessary to write a preface to the section on novels explaining why he had been apologetic 'for seeking to direct the attention of my readers to things so insignificant as *Novels*. . . .' Writings of that sort, he went on to say, 'were rated very low with us—scarcely allowed to pass as part of a nation's permanent literature—and generally deemed altogether unworthy of any grave critical notice'. By 1842, 'all this, however, has been signally, and happily, changed . . .' through the influence of such novelists as Scott, Hugo, Balzac, Jane Austen, Manzoni, and Goethe. 'Among them . . . the honour of this branch of literature has at any rate been splendidly redeemed;—and now bids fair to maintain its place, at the head of all that is graceful and instructive in the productions of modern genius.' [1]

But evidently this startling evolution in the status of the novel among cultivated readers was not completely accepted by all the important critics. For we find De Quincey, as late as 1848 —in the two years preceding, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*,

[1] Francis Jeffrey, *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review* (London, 1844), III, 396.

Vanity Fair, and *Dombey and Son* had been published in England —echoing almost unchanged Jeffrey's youthful opinions: novels are an inferior genre as such and necessarily, by their very nature, ephemeral. 'All novels whatever, the best equally with the worst, have faded almost within the generation that produced them. This is a curse written as a superscription above the whole class. . . . It is only the grander passions of poetry, allying themselves with forms more abstract and permanent' that can last. 'How bestial and degrading at this day seem many of the scenes in Smollett! How coarse are the ideals of Fielding! . . . What a gallery of histrionic masqueraders is thrown open in the novels of Richardson. . . .' And further proof of the lowness of the genre may be had in 'the modern novelists' dependence on his *canaille* of an audience'.[1] In 1848 this contempt was shared by a small minority, although, as we shall see, it persisted with a few people until 1870 and probably after.

But in the early part of the century, it was widespread among educated readers and was based on the newness of the genre and the enormous quantity of bad fiction being turned out for the circulating libraries. The use of prose, a form of discourse inferior to poetry, helped even more to lower the new genre in the early nineteenth century when the idea of ranking genres was still very strong. The chief aesthetic justification for the attack was that great literature must be based on general truths and general types and not minute particularities, i.e. it could not be realistic, and the novel by its very nature forced the author to imitate the transitory. After all, what was so changeable as manners? And manners, it seemed, were the novel's most natural subject matter.

In the eighteenth century most novelists would not have agreed to these strictures. They insisted, like Richardson and Fielding, that they were concerned with universal truths and that their characters were not mere individuals,[2] and Fielding, the most important theorizer on the new form that he helped to invent, always insisted that he was portraying 'not an indi-

[1] 'Forster's Life of Goldsmith', *North British Review*, IX (1848), 193–4.

[2] See the two articles by Houghton W. Taylor, 'Modern Fiction and the Doctrine of Uniformity', *PQ*, XIX (1940), 225–36; and 'Particular Character', *PMLA*, LX (1945), 161–74.

vidual, but a species'.[1] His work, like all high art, did not attend merely to 'the minute accidental discriminations of particular and individual objects . . .' but 'the general and invariable ideas of nature', i.e. the ideal.[2]

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, novels were suspect on still another ground: they seemed so easy to read. Any piece of literature which gives so much pleasure, according to Coleridge—and he apparently enjoyed novels very much—without 'requiring the exertion of thought' must necessarily be 'intellectually and morally enervating' and if indulged would eventually bring about the 'entire destruction of the powers of the mind'.[3] But though Coleridge disapproved of novels as a genre, he was fascinated by the possibilities being opened for a more exact kind of psychological notation. What had been fitfully attempted in the drama could now be done more continuously in the novel: Sterne and Richardson seemed to follow the mind in action and get at the thought processes themselves.[4]

The principal attack on the new genre, however, had nothing whatever to do with aesthetics. The evangelical wing of the church and most of the dissenters strongly disapproved of all imaginative literature as mere entertainment, as a waste of time that should be spent praising God or making money. Thus for the *Evangelical Magazine* in 1793, novels were 'instruments of abomination and ruin'.[5] Seven years later in the same periodical, there appeared a 'spiritual barometer' on which love of novels is ranked with scepticism, one step below drunkenness and adultery.[6]

This view had certainly penetrated serious literary criticism as early as 1783, for we find in a ninety-page treatise 'On Fable and Romance' by the poet James Beattie, evidently written *con amore*, a palinode in the final paragraph that sounds like a medieval treatise on love by a cleric. 'Romances are a dangerous recreation . . . and tend to corrupt the heart, and stimulate the passions. A habit of reading them . . . fills the mind with

[1] *Joseph Andrews* (New York, 1906), Book III, chap. I, p. 166.

[2] Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses* (London, 1887), p. 3.

[3] Quoted from Charles I. Patterson, 'Coleridge's Conception of Dramatic Illusion in the Novel', *ELH*, XVIII (1951), 123.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 130–4.

[5] Maurice Quinlan, *Victorian Prelude* (New York, 1941), p. 224.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 114.

extravagant thoughts, and too often with criminal propensities,' and he would allow his reader to go through only one or two if he wants to 'have something to say on the subject'.[1] When novels were defended from these charges, it was on the ground that they 'show us examples of conduct, superior to those which are to be met with in ordinary life'.[2]

Apologies for the novel had appeared intermittently from the time of Huet in the late seventeenth century. Defending the interminable romances of Mlle de Scudéry and La Calprenède against the charge that these books 'exhaust our Devotion, and inspire us with irregular passions, and corrupt our Manners', the good Bishop answered: 'But what can't Evil and Degenerated Minds make an Ill use of?' and he rested his defence on the fact that romances teach us how 'to live and speak'.[3] Of course there had been attacks and defences of poetry and literature in general from the time of Plato, but there were probably never so many at one time as in the years between 1780 and 1820[4] because of the influence of the evangelical middle classes, who were now such an important part of the reading public.

One of the more ingenious strategies for conferring dignity on the newest literary genre was to show that it was not new at all but was in fact one of the oldest genres; and the writers of treatises on fiction set to work to construct impressive genealogies for the novel. Huet traced it from the ancient Near East, making it older than the Homeric epics, and found it entered European literature through Miletus into Greece and Rome. This history, sometimes including the *Odyssey* as a novel, was used by Beattie, Clara Reeve, and Dr. John Moore, and was finally expanded into a very detailed thousand-page,

[1] *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (Dublin, 1783), II, 320.

[2] Hugh Murray, *The Morality of Fiction*, 1805, quoted in John Tinnon Taylor, *Early Opposition to the Novel (1760–1830)* (New York, 1943), p. 92.

[3] Pierre Daniel Huet, *The History of Romance*, trans. Stephen Lewis (London, 1715), p. 142.

[4] See Taylor, *op. cit.*, and Quinlan, *op. cit.* For typical defences see John Moore, 'A View of the Commencement and Progress of Romances' (1769) in *Works*, V (Edinburgh, 1820); Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance* (Colchester, 1785), reprinted by The Facsimile Text Society (New York, 1930); Mrs. Barbauld, 'An Essay on the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing', prefixed to vol. I of *The British Novelists* (London, 1810).

two-volume work published by John Dunlop in 1816 as the *History of Fiction.* This remained the standard work on the subject until the twentieth century, having been reprinted throughout the nineteenth, all the while accruing more and more notes by successive editors. Although his criticism was rather elementary, and often came second-hand from earlier writers, and although much of the book consisted merely of plot summaries, the important thing was Dunlop's implication that fiction was worth such a large expenditure of time and space, and that the novel was one of the great literary forms with an unbroken history from the time of the Greeks. In his introduction, he tried to define the *raison d'être* of prose fiction, and his definition is cast in typical eighteenth-century terms: 'History treats of man . . . in the mass, and the individuals whom it paints are regarded merely . . . in a public light, without taking into consideration their private feelings, tastes, or habits. Poetry is . . . capable of too little detail. . . . But in fiction we can discriminate without impropriety, and enter into detail without meanness.' Its uses are to soothe, please, amuse, and it is a 'powerful instrument of virtue' teaching by example rather than precept.[1]

The man most responsible for raising the status of the novel with the new middle class is universally considered to be Scott. But if he made the form respectable, he certainly did not consider it an important branch of literature, even though he laughed at the widespread prejudice against it. 'One would almost think', he wrote in a review of *Emma* in the *Quarterly Review*, 'novel-reading fell under this class of frailties [drunkenness and debauchery], since among the crowds who read little else, it is not common to find an individual of hardihood sufficient to avow his taste for these frivolous studies.'[2] But even though 'novel-writing is perhaps the most remarkable addition the moderns have made to literature',[3] still the moderns and not the ancients made the addition, and by virtue of its newness apparently it is inferior to all of the older genres. The reviewer of *Waverley* in the *Critical Review* apparently felt the same way when he exclaimed, 'Why a poet of established fame should

[1] John Dunlop, *The History of Fiction* (Philadelphia, 1842), I, xx–xxii.
[2] *Quarterly Review*, XIV (October, 1815), 188.
[3] *Ibid.*, XI (January, 1814), 301.

dwindle into a scribbler of novels, we cannot tell.' [1] Scott himself said repeatedly in the prefaces to his novels, especially to *The Abbot*, *The Antiquary*, *Guy Mannering*, and *The Fortunes of Nigel*, that he did not plan his books beforehand but improvised them as he went along. (This attitude of Scott's is often assumed to be that of the Victorian novelists as well, but as we shall see, most of them had very different views on the dignity of their art.) In the prefaces to the volumes of Ballantyne's Novelists' Library, which Scott later collected into the *Lives of the Novelists*, where he had the chance to expatiate at the greatest length on his own art, he defended the novel as an 'opiate, baneful, when habitually and constantly resorted to, but of most blessed power in those moments of pain and of languor, when the whole head is sore and the whole heart is sick'.[2] Here is an impressive tribute to the power of novels to help readers escape from their troubles, but it hardly helped to raise the prestige of the form. (Apparently Coleridge had a proper fear of what this opiate could really do to a man's mind.)

In another passage on the effects of novel reading, we can see how thoroughly Benthamite Utilitarianism had penetrated the heart of even this most thorough-going Tory. The worst evil of reading novels is that they 'generate an indisposition to read history and useful literature. . . . [Novels] are really a mere elegance, a luxury contrived for the amusement of polished life, and the gratification of that half love of literature which pervades all ranks. . . .' [3]

Bulwer, annoyed by any undervaluing of his craft, was led by Scott's superciliousness to minimize his influence in making the novel respectable. Bulwer conceded grudgingly in *England and the English* of 1833 that Scott 'tended . . . somewhat to elevate with the vulgar a class of composition that, with the educated, required no factitious elevation; for, with the latter, what new dignity could be thrown upon a branch of letters that Cervantes, Fielding, Le Sage, Voltaire, and Fénelon had already made only less than Epic?' [4] But apparently the educated were at least ambivalent in their feelings towards 'this

[1] James T. Hillhouse, *The Waverley Novels and Their Critics* (Minneapolis, 1936), p. 76.

[2] *The Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott* (Boston, 1829), III, 256.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 77–8.

[4] (London, 1874), p. 251.