

THE MAKING OF THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY NOVEL

Lawrence, Joyce, Faulkner and Beyond

John Orr

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MACMILLAN

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THE MAKING OF THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY NOVEL

He had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn't need a word for that any more than for pride or fear.

Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

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1 Passion and Compassion; Absence and Desire

Many see the nineteenth century as the high point of the realist novel. Its litany of names includes Dickens and Eliot, Balzac and Flaubert, Conrad and James, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Because its aesthetic identity is more secure, its fiction stakes a truer claim to mimesis than its eighteenth-century predecessors. It no longer needs to parade its fidelity to life, nor is it fable which confuses the exposures of existence with the teaching of moral obligation. The author stands back from the text, but fictional characters are not, on that account, puppets to be manipulated. They have their own existence, their own reasons for living. They cannot be construed as the direct embodiment of authorial sentiment or as adjuncts to ingenious plot. The conflict between individual feeling and social obligation, between the tensions of the public and private spheres of middle-class life, are explored more fully than ever before. Above all there is a sense of the fictive world as a social totality. After the French and industrial revolutions, the novel opens out onto reality and history.

It is able to do so because, as Ermath has pointed out,¹ the function of the realistic narrator is to homogenise the medium, like the gaze of the implied spectator in Renaissance painting. The author's narrator is neither omniscient nor personally identifiable with the author. The narrator stands outside the frame of events but within the same continuum. In nineteenth-century realism, the multiple perspective of narrative invokes the moral experience of fictional character as a thing apart from its author. At the same time, realist narrative, through its multiple perspectives of observation, crystallises the fictional character's complex dilemmas of moral choice. Character itself, as a fictional construct of personality in social context, evolves through the process of response to experience, acting upon action, being in the world yet being out of step with it, searching for the elusive rhythms and relationships

of a wider social harmony. Such relationships are not always found but the quest itself is fundamental. It becomes all the more poignant, luring the reader's sympathy, by the closeness to hand, socially observed, of injustice and misfortune. Moral experience involves judging others as well as oneself, finding them likeable or loathsome, sensitive or tyrannical. For the reader, narrative perspective mediates that moral experience. The use of past-tense narrative here, with its evocation of time through memory, is vital. For the narrative movement is historical, change over time the movement through social experience, the yardstick of constant and recurrent tension between the personal world of the character and the public world of experience. As specific setting and linear time, the evocation of the social milieu goes beyond the achievements of the previous century, beyond the salutary warnings against temptation and the comic twists and turns of the picaresque.

But, while narrative evolves into something approaching a unified form, it does so, historically speaking, during a century in which the social contradictions of modernising capitalist societies become more manifest. European realism, from Austen and Stendhal to Hardy and Zola, testifies to the perplexing circumstances of a new form of society whose social and economic changes become more pronounced as the century progresses. The novel responds to that complex momentum, but usually in a mediated form. Its response has a double dialectic – response to change and, simultaneously, response to the analysis of change, the quest of philosophy and sociology to theorise change as a dimension of the social whole. There is often an anguished and incontinent alacrity in the novel's response to the new bourgeois ideologies of progress, the diverse, often contradictory, forms of optimism about capitalism which collide with established traditions and conventional moralities. In England, Dickens agonised about Malthusianism and Bentham's calculus, Eliot charted the survival and resignation of the morally capable in a Spencerian world preaching opportunity yet practising restraint, and Hardy tried to subvert Darwinism by elevating the principle of natural selection to the status of human tragedy.² Such varied response to the ideological forms of progress show us precisely how the social themes of the novel present a constant challenge to its literary form. The major protagonist of the English novel often experiences the contradiction between a

false spirit of optimism in the world at large and a localised reality that is forbidding and brutal.

We might then want to ask, what sustains him or her in such extremes of adversity? There is no single quality but rather a group of complex qualities, structures of feeling which we may term compassion. They involve friendship, affection, reverence, kindness, charity, love and, last but not least, marriage. Compassion is the life-giving antidote to injustice, the face-saving form of mutual esteem which resists and triumphs over adversity. Through it the ego can endure the effects of abusive tyranny, unmerited dislocation from the *civitas*, the dangers of a diminished and embittered self. In the Victorian novel, it has its place within a more specific form, the *Bildungsroman*, where the young hero or heroine often confronts an adult world that is at once vivid and oppressive, attractive in its vitality but brutal in its *modus operandi*. Pip, Becky Sharp and Dorothea Brooke are all innocents abroad in a world of experience which often does not even recognise its oppressiveness or susceptibility to corruption. The Victorian orphan approximates, both socially and figuratively, the general predicament of the outsider subject to ostracism but seeking integration on terms which will lead to personal happiness. As both Miller and Hochman have pointed out,³ the link between the vivid and the inflexible lies in the individual abuse of authority by eccentric tyrants which excuses the novel from adopting a more critical posture towards authority *per se*. Neither Bulstrode and Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, nor the patriarchs of *Bleak House*, draw the reader's attention much beyond their immediate behaviour to the actual forms of authority they embody. This gives rise to a predictable form of closure. Compassion becomes the consolation of the lone youthful hero or heroine, either through friendship with fellow sufferers, courtship and marriage, or through the Dickensian miracle of charity, which operates like a principle of divine intervention in the narrative. The routes are varied but, in terms of the hero's place within a problematic world, the outcome is clear. Through compassion lies reconciliation.

This closure in the Victorian novel consummates the classic realist form by matching perspective to compassion, feeling to epistemology, ways of seeing to ways of feeling. It recovers the clarity of meaning through the affirmation of a shared structure of feeling. Narrative, as an impersonal force, mediates between character and character and, at the same time, between author,

character and reader. In that respect its operation is reflexive but also unifying and consensual. But that affirmative closure only works historically as a response to perceived contradictions between life and value, existence and ideal. The paradox is this. The perceived accentuation of contradiction within society, mediated by analytic interpretation, is a necessary condition of that artistic unity achieved through affirmation.

Where realism is tragic in its conception such closure, however, is impossible, and this raises more disturbing questions about the status of compassion. Compassion, in its literary etymology, is closely linked to that adjacent structure of feeling which De Rougemont in his historical study of Western literature has called passion.⁴ Passion haunts compassion in the novel because in the epic poem and the tragic drama it has already preceded it. The rise of the novel was a departure from a passionate structure of feeling intrinsically connected to the forms of nobility and chivalry in feudal society. Henceforth, its most common form of adulteration was the bourgeois romance. But passion still remained as something both peripheral and dangerous to the consensual traditions of the Western European novel. Its intensity and refusal to compromise could destroy lives just as much as compassion could heal them. In the English novel up to Hardy and including James, but with the exception of Emily Brontë, it is the forbidden structure of feeling, that which is manifestly repressed. In the Russian novel of tragic realism, however, passion and compassion co-exist only for passion as the more intense force to destroy compassion's affirmative powers.⁵

In Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* we bear witness to the courtship of Kitty and Levin side by side with the stormy marriage of the Oblonskys and the doomed affair of Anna and Vronsky. But it is the catastrophe of the last couple, culminating in Anna's suicide, which comes to dominate the book. In *The Idiot*, Nastasyia Filipovna is confronted by a choice between the brutal passion of Rogozhin and the compassionate passion of Myshkin. Her vacillation leads to the breaking of Myshkin's spirit and her own destruction. In both novels passion is the key to a tragic renaissance in the novel which makes Tolstoy and Dostoevsky the historical heirs of Shakespeare and Racine. Yet compassion is a necessary foundation of this renaissance, part of the legacy of Western Europe transformed out of all recognition in the context of pre-bourgeois, absolutist society. Within Western Europe the

function of compassion remains central. It resists ideological acceptance of an illusory 'progress', but through compassionate affirmation retains the *promesse de bonheur* by which progress conventionally ingratiates itself. While the tragic marks a break with society's universal laws, compassion is the nineteenth-century reward for the durability of the ego, that measured consistency of response under duress which reaps its eventual reward. It is, in effect, the novel's imaginary resolution of the most deeply felt contradictions of bourgeois society.

In a pre-bourgeois, aristocratic world, tragic realism gives to passion a rather different structure of feeling. The 'nobility' of passion cannot compromise, even fleetingly, with the ideological forms which progress or success take in bourgeois society. At the extreme where passion thrives but compassion scarcely exists, as in the unique case of *Wuthering Heights*, passion emerges out of a peripheral, pre-civilised wilderness of cruelty. In *The Idiot*, where compassion spasmodically flowers, the compassionate presence is vanquished by cruelty and passion in order that passion, the dominant structure of feeling, can finally destroy its victims. Nobility here is a residual class feeling which defies the domesticating forms of bourgeois civility, even if, as in the case of Nastasya Filippovna, its expressive mode is the cruelty which devours itself. But it is also more. The doomed heroism of Julien Sorel or Nicholas Stavrogin fuses the elevated coldness of nobility with the *passio* of Christ's suffering, which as a religious ecstasy was originally undertaken in the cause of universal human redemption. Thus, irrespective of class background, Heathcliff, Rogozhin, Myshkin, Sorel, Stavrogin and Nostromo are both heroes and nonentities, outcasts mimicking the noble. In their transgressions against the moral code, the passion of loving or rebelling is transmuted into the passion of suffering, a passion which, so merged, often confuses, in the eyes of its protagonists, conquest and redemption, the will-to-power and Christian mercy. Yet the moral codes of bourgeois society or the absolutist state never yield place. They ultimately punish the transgressors and transfer to them the stigma of those who are socially beneath them, the oppressed.

Passion in the nineteenth-century novel is a measure of tragic alienation which points to a deeper sense of social disturbance. As such it remains inimical to the affirmative tradition of the middle-class novel. But the latter, it should be noted, derives its own portrayal of compassion from a specific and necessary social

distance from the central forms of the diffusion of capital, and in particular, of industrial capital. The world of Austen and Eliot is the localised world of the provincial gentry and the professions, Dickens's that of the professional patriarch and the small-scale entrepreneur, Trollope's, more often than not, that of the provincial clergy. Though their work deeply informs our whole understanding of Victorian society, it cannot be read – any more than Balzac can – as co-extensive with the Marxian critique of capital. Marx's vision of the dynamic and global diffusion of capital, which takes no prisoners, has its literary correlative, where at all, in the later work of Conrad and James. The earlier Victorian fiction evokes compassion out of the civilising and respectable forms of middle-class culture, where it finds, albeit with difficulty, its necessary social space. By the turn of the century, the major works of Conrad and James – in particular, *Nostromo* and *The Golden Bowl* – cast in doubt the viability of evoking through fiction the structure of feeling we have called compassion. The crisis in compassion here is inextricable from the crisis in narrative seeing, from a major undermining of confidence in the ability of the multiple perspective of realist narrative to produce a unified field of meaning.

Set in an imaginary South American republic, *Nostromo* gives an extraordinary sense of the different levels of connection and diffusion in the global world of capital. These different levels, and the intricate politics of the American hemisphere, create a complex set of events whose significance cannot be clearly seen in a purely local context. Conrad's narrative irony always questions the immediate meaning which can be attributed to events by referring them back to a more opaque set of motives and circumstances. *Nostromo* acts unwittingly in the context of the misplaced idealism of the Goulds, who in turn are merely acting locally within the global perspective of Holroyd, the rich American industrialist. Multiple perspective reveals contradictory, rather than complementary, meanings, and the regression of motive finds its stylistic expression in the regression of narrative, in the constant chronological looping and the backward movement through time. In Conrad, abrogation of linear narrative indicates a crisis in literary form, the failure of the unilinear progression towards unified meaning at the level of social totality. Narrative of that kind simply cannot encompass the social whole which is unified in such a complex way by capital but equally divided by national

power politics and by class. In *Nostromo* the narrative shifts are more abrupt and more dissonant because the focus of the local perspective, the mining of San Tomé silver, would be narrowed in context and meaning by conventional nineteenth-century style. The added focus of imperial power or capital, which is omnipresent in Conrad, calls perspective into question by emphasising its divisive rather than its consensual attributes, and raising the question as to how the reader, given differing perspectives, is to attribute priority.

The focus of *The Golden Bowl* is more directly on the intersection of cultural and economic capital. The novel is probably the author's deepest penetration into an upper-class world where culture, civility, manners and marriage are conducted according to rules of stringent etiquette but actually moulded by more fundamental considerations of wealth and power. Holroyd's economic patronage of the Goulds is more than matched here in the cultural patronage of the Assinghams by the Ververs. Both are instruments of a higher design, compliant and yet thriving on an exaggerated sense of their own autonomy. The outcomes of course are different. The failure of the Goulds scarcely bothers Holroyd, but the mediation of Fanny Assingham is vital in Maggie's eventual success in freezing out Charlotte Stant and saving her marriage. In *James*, the nature of cultural capital is as perplexing and intricate as the diffusion of economic capital in Conrad's world of political intrigue. Indeed, the Jamesian patterns of intrigue which are conducted socially within a clear and rigid code of order are narratively very far from clear. Narrative perspective and its use of multiple viewpoint, which had previously made meaning absolute in the realist novel, are caught here in the grip of a truly vertiginous relativity.

For one thing, James gives the individual point of view a greater cutting edge than his predecessors. It is the focal point for sustained exploration of the half-formed impression in the character's mind, a technique which is often pedantic and layered in euphemism. Yet the tortuous nature of the narrative is linked to a sensibility of evasion. It is almost as if consciousness were a process of evading things which needed to be thought, and conversation veiled the necessity of saying what needed to be said. Both speech and consciousness act as smokescreen and surface, putting a needed gloss on things which may have a more unpleasant reality. Innocence at times can be a purely upper-class

privilege, its fanciful rationalisations testifying to the leisure and luxury of its protagonists. The magnanimity and seeming beneficence of the Ververs comes from their sense of owning a very large portion of the civilised world.

As one of the great, later works, *The Golden Bowl* consummates the Jamesian sense of ambiguity. At one point our sympathies are with the Prince and Charlotte, at another with Maggie and her father. Critics still remain deeply divided over the moral status of the plutocratic magnate and his affectionate daughter. But multiple perspective has here come a long way from George Eliot. The question as to whether the Ververs are angels or monsters can never be clearly resolved. In the course of his narrative, James can shift our angle of perception through 180 degrees and, if Maggie insistently claims not to know where she stands, then neither emphatically do we. The struggle for knowledge and power, centrally engaged in the text, becomes a fundamental part of actually reading it. Maggie strives to separate the Prince from Charlotte without disturbing the delicate balance of power preserved by his pretended ignorance of the affair. Her tenacity puts her in a long line of heroines from Austen onwards who struggle to establish in a patriarchal world what they see to be morally right. Yet Maggie's relationship with her father suggests a higher amorality, a deeper and forbidding conspiratorial power, a nestling within the bosom of ultimate patriarchy.

The Golden Bowl simultaneously calls into question the consensual narrative perspective and the compassionate structure of feeling. Because we do not know what is truly happening, we cannot tell whether the beneficence of the Ververs towards the world and towards each other is truly genuine. The motives behind a magnanimity which is apparently without limit remain dense and inscrutable. The compassion which appears in middle-class life as the ultimate resistance to an ideology which fails appears at the centre of upper-class life to be manipulated as a tool of ideology itself. The realist narrative can no longer effectively provide through consensual perspective an imaginary resolution of cultural contradictions.

This is not to argue for a failure on the part of Conrad or James but rather to suggest that the artistic achievement of raising the novel to a new peak created fundamental problems for any future realist form. Their renewal of the realist form, as with Mann and Proust, also testifies to its decomposition. Compassion becomes

problematic because, in evoking through mediate forms the global power of capital upon the lives of individuals, they erode the credible powers of fictional resolution and undermine the certainties of compassion. Passion, on the other hand, remains suppressed as part of the legacy of Victorian morality, assumed but never evoked, recognised as more powerful and subterranean than by the Victorians, but still treated largely as something unspoken. When the renaissance of the realist form occurs in Lawrence, passion is introduced into the English novel in a startling and revolutionary manner, but only because it abrogates the tragic and renews through contiguity the compassionate structure of feeling. Compassion here, though it still manifests itself as friendship, esteem and marriage, shows no closure. Central to Lawrence's transformation is the sense of a life which continues beyond the ending of his fiction, 'the wave which cannot halt', bearing a provisional autonomy from the text which its author cannot fully encapsulate.

Prior to Lawrence, however, there was a totally different resolution for the reading public of the crisis in realist form. The rise of popular fiction among middle-class and lower-middle class readers which came about through the new technologies of printing and the reorganisation of publishing produced its own diluted and vulgarised expurgation of the classic structures of feeling. One of the most powerful of its many forms was the romance. Romance has traditionally been the popular dilution of both passion and compassion, which remained rare as fully articulated structures of feeling. And romance has its own formulae. Infatuation, idealised yearning, gratuitous misfortune, convenient love: all are familiar through their constant repetition. The solidity of compassion is sentimentalised out of existence. The intense mutuality and destructiveness of passion remain out of reach. Instead it is usual for the beloved simply to become a sublimated compensation for what the world of the social, a world 'without love', cannot offer. Even in its most powerful form, say in the work of Charlotte Brontë, romance lacks both the destructive passion of *Wuthering Heights* but also the durability of moral experience to be found in the female protagonists of Austen, Eliot and Gaskell. Yet the way forward for the English-language novel was prefigured by the great French work which came to serve as a model of imitation for much popular romance. The novel which

in the nineteenth century most fully dissects romance yet errs in spite of itself on the side of passion is *Madame Bovary*.

Flaubert achieves this by transcending the romantic stereotypes he uses and parodies, by transforming romance into the love of love, distancing himself from Emma's folly but fusing her feeling and action into an almost abstract intensity which is then consecrated as literary form. That historical moment, the decisive departure from Stendhal, whom Flaubert consciously rejected but whose impact he could not escape, links social mobility to the triumph of style. In veering from the aristocratic, in eclipse after 1848, to the provincial bourgeois, Flaubert turns passion from a relationship into an obsession which veers between romance and desire. He repeats the centripetal movement of Stendhal from country to city, but, unlike Julian Sorel, Emma never gets to the Paris of which she dreams, captures no aristocratic lover, no bitter-sweet flavour of her adored capital. The odds are always against the novel evoking the passionate structure of feeling, and in all the later imitations of Flaubert the possibility does not even arise. Why, then, is it here that passion is sustained?

The clue lies in Flaubert's modernity. During the daily round of his heroine, the narrator is always on the outside looking in, cold and distant, never passing judgement, yet at the same time still evoking the world through her eyes. It is precisely this focus which enables him to tread the razor's edge between passion and desire. Emma's love of love emerges out of the conventions of romance and chivalry, which in a calculated way he reduces to daydream and fantasy. But real adultery projects Emma beyond mere sublimation, and itself becomes a consuming passion as her affairs run the gamut from sublimation to sensuality, from romance to a clear but understated sensual desire. This uneven, discontinuous journey of Emma's passion, in which the ideal becomes material and then expires, parallels the phase of her marriage during which domestic profligacy spirals into hopeless irretrievable debt and drives her to poison herself.

Through Flaubert's parody of romance, passion actually strengthens its social referent. The tragic climax rests on the homology between the transformation of credit into bankruptcy and the transformation of passion into desire. The narrative traces a transformation within the text which is later to mark a transformation within the twentieth-century novel. With its evocation of the immediacy of the sense world and its consistent narrative refusal