

Faber Finds

F. R. Leavis

The Great Tradition

George Eliot, Henry James,
Joseph Conrad



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Copyright

I know how hard it is. One needs something to make one's mood deep and sincere. There are so many little frets that prevent our coming at the real naked essence of our vision. It sounds boshy, doesn't it? I often think one ought to be able to pray, before one works – and then leave it to the Lord. Isn't it hard, hard work to come to real grips with one's imagination – throw everything overboard. I always feel as if I stood naked for the fire of Almighty God to go through me – and it's rather an awful feeling. One has to be so terribly religious, to be an artist. I often think of my dear Saint Lawrence on his gridiron, when he said, 'Turn me over, brothers, I am done enough on this side.'

To Ernest Collings, 24 February 1913
The Letters of D. H. Lawrence

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THE greater part of this book appeared first in *Scrutiny*, and for permission to use this matter I am indebted to the Editors. The second part of the critique of Henry James appeared in the issue for March 1937. That of Conrad appeared in June and October 1941, and that of George Eliot in 1945 and 1946. I have also to thank Messrs John Farquharson, acting on behalf of the Henry James estate, for kind permission to reprint *Daniel Deronda: A Conversation*, as an Appendix to this volume.

My sense of my immeasurable indebtedness, in every page of this book, to my wife cannot be adequately expressed, and I cannot express it at all without an accompanying consciousness of short-comings – no one but myself has any part in them – that makes me insist at the same time on my claim to all the responsibility.

F.R.L.

CHAPTER 1

THE GREAT TRADITION

‘... not dogmatically but deliberately ...’

JOHNSON: *Preface to Shakespeare*

THE great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad – to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point in history. Since Jane Austen, for special reasons, needs to be studied at considerable length, I confine myself in this book to the last three. Critics have found me narrow, and I have no doubt that my opening proposition, whatever I may say to explain and justify it, will be adduced in reinforcement of their strictures. It passes as fact (in spite of the printed evidence) that I pronounce Milton negligible, dismiss ‘the Romantics’, and hold that, since Donne, there is no poet we need bother about except Hopkins and Eliot. The view, I suppose, will be as confidently attributed to me that, except Jane Austen, George Eliot, James, and Conrad, there are no novelists in English worth reading.

The only way to escape misrepresentation is never to commit oneself to any critical judgement that makes an impact – that is, never to say anything. I still, however, think that the best way to promote profitable discussion is to be as clear as possible with oneself about what one sees and judges, to try and establish the essential discriminations in the given field of interest, and to state them as clearly as one can (for disagreement, if necessary). And it seems to me that in the field of fiction some challenging discriminations are very much called for; the field is so large and offers such insidious temptations to complacent confusions of judgement and to critical indolence. It is of the field of fiction belonging to Literature that I am thinking, and I am thinking in particular of the present vogue of the Victorian age. Trollope, Charlotte Yonge, Mrs Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade, Charles and Henry Kingsley, Marryat, Shorthouse¹ – one after another the minor novelists of that period are being commended to our attention, written up, and publicized by broadcast, and there is a marked tendency to suggest that they not only have various kinds of interest to offer but that they are living

classics. (Are not they all in the literary histories?) There are Jane Austen, Mrs Gaskell, Scott, 'the Brontës',² Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Trollope, and so on, all, one gathers, classical novelists.

It is necessary to insist, then, that there are important distinctions to be made, and that far from all of the names in the literary histories really belong to the realm of significant creative achievement. And as a recall to a due sense of differences it is well to start by distinguishing the few really great – the major novelists who count in the same way as the major poets, in the sense that they not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life.³

To insist on the pre-eminent few in this way is not to be indifferent to tradition; on the contrary, it is the way towards understanding what tradition is. 'Tradition', of course, is a term with many forces – and often very little at all. There is a habit nowadays of suggesting that there is a tradition of 'the English Novel', and that all that can be said of the tradition (that being its peculiarity) is that 'the English Novel' can be anything you like. To distinguish the major novelists in the spirit proposed is to form a more useful idea of tradition (and to recognize that the conventionally established view of the past of English fiction needs to be drastically revised). It is in terms of the major novelists, those significant in the way suggested, that tradition, in any serious sense, has its significance.

To be important historically is not, of course, to be necessarily one of the significant few. Fielding deserves the place of importance given him in the literary histories, but he hasn't the kind of classical distinction we are also invited to credit him with. He is important not because he leads to Mr J. B. Priestley but because he leads to Jane Austen, to appreciate whose distinction is to feel that life isn't long enough to permit of one's giving much time to Fielding or any to Mr Priestley.

Fielding made Jane Austen possible by opening the central tradition of English fiction. In fact, to say that the English novel began with him is as reasonable as such propositions ever are. He completed the work begun by the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, in the pages of which we see the drama turning into the novel – that this development should occur by way of journalism being in the natural course of things. To the art of presenting character and *mœurs* learnt in that school (he himself, before he became a novelist, was both playwright and periodical essayist) he joined a narrative habit the nature of which is sufficiently indicated by his own phrase, 'comic epic in prose'. That the eighteenth century, which

hadn't much lively reading to choose from, but had much leisure, should have found *Tom Jones* exhilarating is not surprising; nor is it that Scott, and Coleridge, should have been able to give that work superlative praise. Standards are formed in comparison, and what opportunities had they for that? But the conventional talk about the 'perfect construction' of *Tom Jones* (the late Hugh Walpole brought it out triumphantly and you may hear it in almost any course of lectures on 'the English Novel') is absurd. There can't be subtlety of organization without richer matter to organize, and subtler interests, than Fielding has to offer. He is credited with range and variety and it is true that some episodes take place in the country and some in Town, some in the churchyard and some in the inn, some on the high-road and some in the bedchamber, and so on. But we haven't to read a very large proportion of *Tom Jones* in order to discover the limits of the essential interests it has to offer us. Fielding's attitudes, and his concern with human nature, are simple, and not such as to produce an effect of anything but monotony (on a mind, that is, demanding more than external action) when exhibited at the length of an 'epic in prose'. What he can do appears to best advantage in *Joseph Andrews*. *Jonathan Wild*, with its famous irony, seems to me mere hobbledehoydom (much as one applauds the determination to explode the gangster-hero), and by *Amelia* Fielding has gone soft.

We all know that if we want a more inward interest it is to Richardson we must go. And there is more to be said for Johnson's preference, and his emphatic way of expressing it at Fielding's expense, than is generally recognized. Richardson's strength in the analysis of emotional and moral states is in any case a matter of common acceptance; and *Clarissa* is a really impressive work. But it's no use pretending that Richardson can ever be made a current classic again. The substance of interest that he too has to offer is in its own way extremely limited in range and variety, and the demand he makes on the reader's time is in proportion – and absolutely – so immense as to be found, in general, prohibitive (though I don't know that I wouldn't sooner read through again *Clarissa* than *À la recherche du temps perdu*). But we can understand well enough why his reputation and influence should have been so great throughout Europe; and his immediately relevant historical importance is plain: he too is a major fact in the background of Jane Austen.

The social gap between them was too wide, however, for his work to be usable by her directly: the more he tries to deal with ladies and gentlemen, the more immitigably vulgar he is. It was Fanny Burney who, by transposing him into educated life, made it possible for Jane Austen to

absorb what he had to teach her. Here we have one of the important lines of English literary history – Richardson – Fanny Burney – Jane Austen. It is important because Jane Austen is one of the truly great writers, and herself a major fact in the background of other great writers. Not that Fanny Burney is the only other novelist who counts in her formation; she read all there was to read, and took all that was useful to her – which wasn't only lessons.⁴ In fact, Jane Austen, in her indebtedness to others, provides an exceptionally illuminating study of the nature of originality, and she exemplifies beautifully the relations of 'the individual talent' to tradition. If the influences bearing on her hadn't comprised something fairly to be called tradition she couldn't have found herself and her true direction; but her relation to tradition is a creative one. She not only makes tradition for those coming after, but her achievement has for us a retroactive effect: as we look back beyond her we see in what goes before, and see because of her, potentialities and significances brought out in such a way that, for us, she creates the tradition we see leading down to her. Her work, like the work of all great creative writers, gives a meaning to the past.

Having, in examination papers and undergraduate essays, come much too often on the proposition that 'George Eliot is the first modern novelist', I finally tracked it down to Lord David Cecil's *Early Victorian Novelists*. In so far as it is possible to extract anything clear and coherent from the variety of things that Lord David Cecil says by way of explaining the phrase, it is this: that George Eliot, being concerned, not to offer 'primarily an entertainment', but to explore a significant theme – a theme significant in its bearing on the 'serious problems and preoccupations of mature life' (page 291) – breaks with 'those fundamental conventions both of form and matter within which the English novel up till then had been constructed' (page 288). What account, then, are we to assume of Jane Austen? Clearly, one that appears to be the most commonly held: she creates delightful characters ('Compare Jane Austen's characterization with Scott's'⁵ – a recurrent examination-question) and lets us forget our cares and moral tensions in the comedy of pre-eminently civilized life. The idea of 'civilization' invoked appears to be closely related to that expounded by Mr Clive Bell.⁶

Lord David Cecil actually compares George Eliot with Jane Austen. The passage is worth quoting because the inadequate ideas of form ('composition') and moral interest it implies – ideas of the relation between 'art' and 'life' as it concerns the novelist – are very

representative. (Its consistency with what has been said about George Eliot earlier in the same essay isn't obvious, but that doesn't disturb the reader by the time he has got here.)

It is also easy to see why her form doesn't satisfy us as Jane Austen's does. Life is chaotic, art is orderly. The novelist's problem is to evoke an orderly composition which is also a convincing picture of life. It is Jane Austen's triumph that she solves this problem perfectly, fully satisfies the rival claims of life and art. Now George Eliot does not. She sacrifices life to art. Her plots are too neat and symmetrical to be true. We do not feel them to have grown naturally from their situation like a flower, but to have been put together deliberately and calculatedly like a building. (page 322)

Jane Austen's plots, and her novels in general, were put together very 'deliberately and calculatedly' (if not 'like a building').⁷ But her interest in 'composition' is not something to be put over against her interest in life; nor does she offer an 'aesthetic' value that is separable from moral significance. The principle of organization, and the principle of development, in her work is an intense moral interest of her own in life that is in the first place a preoccupation with certain problems that life compels on her as personal ones.⁸ She is intelligent and serious enough to be able to impersonalize her moral tensions as she strives, in her art, to become more fully conscious of them, and to learn what, in the interests of life, she ought to do with them. Without her intense moral preoccupation she wouldn't have been a great novelist.

This account of her would, if I had cared to use the formula, have been my case for calling Jane Austen, and not anyone later, 'the first modern novelist'. In applying it to George Eliot, Lord David Cecil says: 'In fact, the laws conditioning the form of George Eliot's novels are the same laws that condition those of Henry James and Wells and Conrad and Arnold Bennett.' I don't know what Wells is doing in that sentence; there is an elementary distinction to be made between the *discussion* of problems and ideas, and what we find in the great novelists. And, for all the generous sense of common humanity to be found in his best work, Bennett seems to me never to have been disturbed enough by life to come anywhere near greatness. But it would certainly be reasonable to say that 'the laws conditioning the form of Jane Austen's novels are the same laws that condition those of George Eliot and Henry James and Conrad'. Jane Austen, in fact, is the inaugurator of the great tradition of the English novel – and by 'great tradition' I mean the tradition to which

what is great in English fiction belongs.

The great novelists in that tradition are all very much concerned with 'form'; they are all very original technically, having turned their genius to the working out of their own appropriate methods and procedures. But the peculiar quality of their preoccupation with 'form' may be brought out by a contrasting reference to Flaubert. Reviewing Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*, D. H. Lawrence⁹ adduces Flaubert as figuring to the world the 'will of the writer to be greater than and undisputed lord over the stuff he writes'. This attitude in art, as Lawrence points out, is indicative of an attitude in life – or towards life. Flaubert, he comments, 'stood away from life as from a leprosy'. For the later Aesthetic writers, in general, represent in a weak kind of way the attitude that Flaubert maintained with a perverse heroism, 'form' and 'style' are ends to be sought for themselves, and the chief preoccupation is with elaborating a beautiful style to apply to the chosen subject. There is George Moore, who in the best circles, I gather (from a distance), is still held to be among the very greatest masters of prose, though – I give my own limited experience for what it is worth – it is very hard to find an admirer who, being pressed, will lay his hand on his heart and swear he has read one of the 'beautiful' novels through.' The novelist's problem is to evolve an orderly composition which is also a convincing picture of life' – this is the way an admirer of George Moore sees it. Lord David Cecil, attributing this way to Jane Austen, and crediting her with a superiority over George Eliot in 'satisfying the rival claims of life and art', explains this superiority, we gather, by a freedom from moral preoccupations that he supposes her to enjoy. (George Eliot, he tells us, was a Puritan, and earnestly bent on instruction.)¹⁰

As a matter of fact, when we examine the formal perfection of *Emma*, we find that it can be appreciated only in terms of the moral preoccupations that characterize the novelist's peculiar interest in life. Those who suppose it to be an 'aesthetic matter', a beauty of 'composition' that is combined, miraculously, with 'truth to life', can give no adequate reason for the view that *Emma* is a great novel, and no intelligent account of its perfection of form. It is in the same way true of the other great English novelists that their interest in their art gives them the opposite of an affinity with Pater and George Moore; it is, brought to an intense focus, an unusually developed interest in life. For, far from having anything of Flaubert's disgust or disdain or boredom, they are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity.

It might be commented that what I have said of Jane Austen and her successors is only what can be said of any novelist of unqualified greatness. That is true. But there is – and this is the point – an English tradition, and these great classics of English fiction belong to it; a tradition that, in the talk about ‘creating characters’ and ‘creating worlds’, and the appreciation of Trollope and Mrs Gaskell and Thackeray and Meredith and Hardy and Virginia Woolf, appears to go unrecognized. It is not merely that we have no Flaubert (and I hope I haven’t seemed to suggest that a Flaubert is no more worth having than a George Moore). Positively, there is a continuity from Jane Austen. There is evidence enough that George Eliot admired her work profoundly. The writer whose intellectual weight and moral earnestness strike some critics as her handicap certainly saw in Jane Austen something more than an ideal contemporary of Lytton Strachey.¹¹ What one great original artist learns from another, whose genius and problems are necessarily very different, is the hardest kind of ‘influence’ to define, even when we see it to have been of the profoundest importance. The obvious manifestation of influence is to be seen in this kind of passage:

A little daily embroidery had been a constant element in Mrs Transome’s life; that soothing occupation of taking stitches to produce what neither she nor anyone else wanted, was then the resource of many a well-born and unhappy woman ...

In short, he felt himself to be in love in the right place, and was ready to endure a great deal of predominance, which, after all, a man could always put down when he liked. Sir James had no idea that he should ever like to put down the predominance of this handsome girl, in whose cleverness he delighted. Why not? A man’s mind – what there is of it – has always the advantage of being masculine – as the smallest birch-tree is of a higher kind than the most soaring palm – and even his ignorance is of a sounder quality. Sir James might not have originated this estimate; but a kind Providence furnishes the limpest personality with a little gum or starch in the form of tradition.

The kind of irony here is plainly akin to Jane Austen’s – though it is characteristic enough of George Eliot; what she found was readily assimilated to her own needs. In Jane Austen herself the irony has a serious background, and is no mere display of ‘civilization’. George Eliot wouldn’t have been interested in it if she hadn’t perceived its full significance – its relation to the essential moral interest offered by Jane

Austen's art. And here we come to the profoundest kind of influence, that which is not manifested in likeness. One of the supreme debts one great writer can owe another is the realization of unlikeness (there is, of course, no significant unlikeness without the common concern – and the common seriousness of concern – with essential human issues). One way of putting the difference between George Eliot and the Trollopes whom we are invited to consider along with her is to say that she was capable of understanding Jane Austen's greatness and capable of learning from her. And except for Jane Austen there was no novelist to learn from – none whose work had any bearing on her own essential problems as a novelist.

Henry James also was a great admirer of Jane Austen,¹² and in his case too there is that obvious aspect of influence which can be brought out by quotation. And there is for him George Eliot as well, coming between. In seeing him in an English tradition I am not slighting the fact of his American origin; an origin that doesn't make him less of an English novelist, of the great tradition, than Conrad later. That he was an American is a fact of the first importance for the critic, as Mr Yvor Winters brings out admirably in his book, *Maule's Curse*.¹³ Mr Winters discusses him as a product of the New England ethos in its last phase, when a habit of moral strenuousness remained after dogmatic Puritanism had evaporated and the vestigial moral code was evaporating too. This throws a good deal of light on the elusiveness that attends James's peculiar ethical sensibility. We have, characteristically, in reading him, a sense that important choices are in question and that our finest discrimination is being challenged, while at the same time we can't easily produce for discussion any issues that have moral substance to correspond.

It seems relevant also to note that James was actually a New Yorker. In any case, he belonged by birth and upbringing to that refined civilization of the old European America which we have learnt from Mrs Wharton to associate with New York. His bent was to find a field for his ethical sensibility in the appreciative study of such a civilization – the 'civilization' in question being a matter of personal relations between members of a mature and sophisticated Society. It is doubtful whether at any time in any place he could have found what would have satisfied his implicit demand: the actual fine art of civilized social intercourse that would have justified the flattering intensity of expectation he brought to it in the form of his curiously transposed and subtilized ethical sensibility.

History, it is plain, was already leaving him *déraciné* in his own

country, so that it is absurd to censure him, as some American critics have done, for pulling up his roots. He could hardly become deeply rooted elsewhere, but the congenial soil and climate were in Europe rather than in the country of his birth. There is still some idealizing charm about his English country-house¹⁴ in *The Portrait of a Lady*, but that book is one of the classics of the language, and we can't simply regret the conditions that produced something so finely imagined. It is what *The Egoist* is supposed to be. Compare the two books, and the greatness of Henry James as intellectual poet-novelist¹⁵ of 'high civilization' comes out in a way that, even for the most innocently deferential reader, should dispose of Meredith's pretensions for ever. James's wit is real and always natural, his poetry intelligent as well as truly rich, and there is nothing bogus, cheap, or vulgar about his idealizations: certain human potentialities are nobly celebrated.

That he is a novelist who has closely studied his fellow-craftsmen is plain – and got from them more than lessons in the craft. It is plain, for instance, in *The Portrait of a Lady* that he sees England through literature. We know that he turned an attentive professional eye on the French masters. He has (in his early mature work) an easy and well-bred technical sophistication, a freedom from any marks of provinciality, and a quiet air of knowing his way about the world that distinguish him from his contemporaries in the language. If from the English point of view he is unmistakably an American, he is also very much a European.

But there could be no question of his becoming a French master in English, and the help he could get from the Continent towards solving his peculiar problem was obviously limited.¹⁶ It was James who put his finger on the weakness in *Madame Bovary*: the discrepancy between the technical ('aesthetic') intensity, with the implied attribution of interest to the subject, and the actual moral and human paucity of this subject on any mature valuation. His own problem was to justify in terms of an intense interest in sophisticated 'civilization' his New England ethical sensibility. The author who offered a congenial study would have to be very different from Flaubert. It was, as a matter of fact, a very English novelist, the living representative of the great tradition – a writer as unlike Flaubert as George Eliot.

George Eliot's reputation being what it is, this suggestion won't recommend itself to everyone immediately. 'Like most writers, George Eliot could only create from the world of her personal experience – in her case middle-and lower-class rural England of the nineteenth-century Midlands.'¹⁷ Moreover, she was confined by a Puritanism such as James

(apart from the fact that he wasn't lower-middle-class) had left a generation or two behind him: 'the enlightened person of today must forget his dislike of Puritanism when he reads George Eliot'. Weighty, provincial, and pledged to the 'school-teacher's virtues', she was not qualified by nature or breeding to appreciate high civilization, even if she had been privileged to make its acquaintance. These seem to be accepted commonplaces – which shows how little even those who write about her have read her work.

Actually, though 'Puritan' is a word used with many intentions, it is misleading to call her a Puritan at all,¹⁸ and utterly false to say that her 'imagination had to scrape what nourishment it could from the bare bones of Puritan ethics'. There was nothing restrictive or timid about her ethical habit; what she brought from her Evangelical background was a radically reverent attitude towards life, a profound seriousness of the kind that is a first condition of any real intelligence, and an interest in human nature that made her a great psychologist. Such a psychologist, with such a relation to Puritanism, was, of all the novelists open to his study, the one peculiarly relevant to James's interests and problems. That, at any rate, becomes an irresistible proposition when it is added that, in her most mature work, she deals, and (in spite of the accepted commonplaces about her) deals consummately, with just that 'civilization' which was James's chosen field. To say this is to have the confident wisdom of hindsight, for it can be shown, with a conclusiveness rarely possible in these matters, that James did actually go to school to George Eliot.¹⁹

That is a fair way of putting the significance of the relation between *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Daniel Deronda* that I discuss in my examination of the latter book. That relation demonstrated, nothing more is needed in order to establish the general relation I posit between the two novelists. James's distinctive bent proclaims itself uncompromisingly in what he does with *Daniel Deronda* (on the good part of which – I call it *Gwendolen Harleth* – *The Portrait of a Lady* is a variation; for the plain fact I point out amounts to that). The moral substance of George Eliot's theme is subtilized into something going with the value James sets on 'high civilization'; her study of conscience has disappeared. A charming and intelligent girl, determined to live 'finely', confidently exercises her 'free ethical sensibility' (Mr Winters's phrase) and discovers that she is capable of disastrous misvaluations (which is not surprising, seeing not only how inexperienced she is, but how much an affair of inexplicitnesses, overtones, and fine shades is the world of discourse she

moves in). It is a tragedy in which, for her, neither remorse is involved, nor, in the ordinary sense, the painful growth of conscience, though no doubt her 'ethical sensibility' matures.

Along the line revealed by the contrast between the two novels James develops an art so unlike George Eliot's that, but for the fact (which seems to have escaped notice) of the relation of *The Portrait of a Lady* to *Daniel Deronda*, it would, argument being necessary, have been difficult to argue at all convincingly that there was the significant relation between the novelists. And I had better insist that I am not concerned to establish *indebtedness*. What I have in mind is the fact of the great tradition and the apartness of the two great novelists above the ruck of Gaskells and Trollopes and Merediths. Of the earlier novelists it was George Eliot alone (if we except the minor relevance of Jane Austen) whose work had a direct and significant bearing on his own problem. It had this bearing because she was a great novelist, and because in her maturest work she handled with unprecedented subtlety and refinement the personal relations of sophisticated characters exhibiting the 'civilization' of the 'best society', and used, in so doing, an original psychological notation corresponding to the fineness of her psychological and moral insight. Her moral seriousness was for James very far from a disqualification; it qualified her for a kind of influence that neither Flaubert nor the admired Turgenev could have.

Circumstances discussed above made James peculiarly dependent on literature; the contact with George Eliot's distinctive kind of greatness was correspondingly important for him. It is significant that *Madame de Mauves* (1874), the early story in which he uses something like the theme of *The Portrait of a Lady*, has a wordy quality premonitory (one can't help feeling) of the cobwebbiness that afflicted him in his late phase. We can't doubt that George Eliot counts for something in the incomparably superior concreteness of *The Portrait of a Lady*. In that book, and in its successor, *The Bostonians*, his art is at its most concrete, and least subject to the weakness attendant on his subtlety. It is not derivativeness that is in question, but the relation between two original geniuses. 'We cannot attempt to trace', says Mr Van Wyck Brooks in *The Pilgrimage of Henry James*, 'the astonishing development of a creative faculty which, in the course of a dozen years, transcended the simple plot-maker's art of *The American*, the factitious local-colourism of *Roderick Hudson*, and rendered itself capable of the serene beauty of *The Portrait of a Lady*, the masterly assurance of *The Bostonians*, the mature perfection of *Washington Square*.' It is more than a guess that, in that development,

George Eliot had some part.

The reader is likely to comment, I suppose, on the degree in which my treatment of James is taken up with discussing his limitations and the regrettable aspects of his later development. Since it will also be noted that, of my three novelists, he, in terms of space, gets least attention, it might be concluded that a corresponding relative valuation is implied. I had, then, perhaps better say that there is no such relation intended between valuation and length of treatment. I will not, however, deny that, of the three, James seems to me to give decidedly most cause for dissatisfaction and qualification. He is, all the same, one of the great. His registration of sophisticated human consciousness is one of the classical creative achievements: it *added* something as only genius can. And when he is at his best that something is seen to be of great human significance. He creates an ideal civilized sensibility; a humanity capable of communicating by the finest shades of inflexion and implication: a nuance may engage a whole complex moral economy and the perceptive response be the index of a major valuation or choice. Even *The Awkward Age*, in which the extremely developed subtlety of treatment is not as remote as one would wish from the hypertrophy that finally overcame him, seems to me a classic; in no other work can we find anything like that astonishing – in so astonishing a measure successful – use of sophisticated ‘society’ dialogue.

In considering James’s due status, in fact, it is not easy to say just where the interest of the classical artist turns into the interest of the classical ‘case’. But it seems to me obvious that the ‘case’ becomes in some places boring to the point of unreadableness. Yet there is a tacit conspiracy to admire some of the works that fall, partly, at any rate (wholly, one must conclude, for the admirers who risk explanatory comment on them), under this description. And here is sufficient reason why an attempt to promote a due appreciation of James’s genius should give a good deal of discriminatory attention to the tendencies that, as they develop, turn vital subtlety into something else.

When we come to Conrad we can’t, by way of insisting that he is indeed significantly ‘in’ the tradition – in and of it, neatly and conclusively relate him to any one English novelist. Rather, we have to stress his foreignness – that he was a Pole, whose first other language was French.²⁰ I remember remarking to André Chevrillon how surprising a choice it was on Conrad’s part to write in English, especially seeing he was so clearly a student of the French masters. And I remember the reply, to the effect that it wasn’t at all surprising, since Conrad’s work

couldn't have been written in French. M. Chevrillon, with the authority of a perfect bilingual, went on to explain in terms of the characteristics of the two languages why it had to be English. Conrad's themes and interests demanded the concreteness and action – the dramatic energy – of English. We might go further and say that Conrad chose to write his novels in English for the reasons that led him to become a British Master Mariner.

I am not, in making this point, concurring in the emphasis generally laid on the Prose Laureate of the Merchant Service. What needs to be stressed is the great novelist. Conrad's great novels, if they deal with the sea at all, deal with it only incidentally. But the Merchant Service is for him both a spiritual fact and a spiritual symbol, and the interests that made it so for him control and animate his art everywhere. Here, then, we have a master of the English language, who chose it for its distinctive qualities and because of the moral tradition associated with it, and whose concern with art – he being like Jane Austen and George Eliot and Henry James an innovator in 'form' and method – is the servant of a profoundly serious interest in life. To justify our speaking of such a novelist as in the tradition, that represented by those three, we are not called on to establish particular relations with any one of them. Like James, he brought a great deal from outside, but it was of the utmost importance to him that he found a serious art of fiction there in English, and that there *were*, in English, great novelists to study. He drew from English literature what he needed, and learnt in that peculiar way of genius which is so different from imitation. And for us, who have *him* as well as the others, there he is, unquestionably a constitutive part of the tradition, belonging in the full sense.

As being technically sophisticated he may be supposed to have found fortifying stimulus in James, whom he is quite unlike (though James, in his old age, was able to take a connoisseur's interest in *Chance* and appreciate with a professional eye the sophistication of the 'doing').²¹ But actually, the one influence at all obvious is that of a writer at the other end of the scale from sophistication, Dickens. As I point out in my discussion of him, Conrad is in certain respects so like Dickens that it is difficult to say for just how much influence Dickens counts. He is undoubtedly there in the London of *The Secret Agent*: though – except for the extravagant *macabre* of the cab-journey, where the writer was in fact F. M. Ford, and (from the same hand – there was a desperate push to get the book finished) one or two minor instances of mannerism – he has been transmuted into Conrad. This co-presence of obvious influence with

assimilation suggests that Dickens may have counted for more in Conrad's mature art than seems at first probable: it suggests that Dickens may have encouraged the development in Conrad's art of that energy of vision and registration in which they are akin. ('When people say that Dickens exaggerates,' says Santayana, 'it seems to me that they can have no eyes and no ears. They probably have only *notions* of what things and people are; they accept them conventionally, at their diplomatic value.') We may reasonably, too, in the same way see some Dickensian influence in Conrad's use of melodrama, or what would have been melodrama in Dickens; for in Conrad the end is a total significance of a profoundly serious kind.

The reason for not including Dickens in the line of great novelists is implicit in this last phrase. The kind of greatness in question has been sufficiently defined. That Dickens was a great genius and is permanently among the classics is certain. But the genius was that of a great entertainer, and he had for the most part no profounder responsibility as a creative artist than this description suggests. Praising him magnificently in *Soliloquies in England*, Santayana, in concluding, says: 'In every English-speaking home, in the four quarters of the globe, parents and children would do well to read Dickens aloud of a winter's evening.' This note is right and significant.²² The adult mind doesn't as a rule find in Dickens a challenge to an unusual and sustained seriousness. I can think of only one of his books in which his distinctive creative genius is controlled throughout to a unifying and organizing significance, and that is *Hard Times*, which seems, because of its unusualness and comparatively small scale, to have escaped recognition for the great thing it is.

It has a kind of perfection as a work of art that we don't associate with Dickens – a perfection that is one with the sustained and complete seriousness for which among his productions it is unique. Though in length it makes a good-sized modern novel, it is on a small scale for Dickens: it leaves no room for the usual repetitive overdoing and loose inclusiveness. It is plain that he felt no temptation to these, he was too urgently possessed by his themes; the themes were too rich, too tightly knit in their variety, and too commanding. Certain key characteristics of Victorian civilization had clearly come home to him with overwhelming force, embodied in concrete manifestations that suggested to him connections and significances he had never realized so fully before. The fable is perfect; the symbolic and representative values are inevitable, and, sufficiently plain at once, yield fresh subtleties as the action

develops naturally in its convincing historical way.

In *Gradgrind* and *Bounderby* we have, in significant relation, two aspects of Victorian Utilitarianism. In *Gradgrind* it is a serious creed, devoutly held, and so, if repellent (as the name conveys), not wholly unrespectable; but we are shown *Gradgrind* as on the most intimate and uncritical terms with *Josiah Bounderby*, in whom we have the grossest and crassest, the most utterly unspiritual egotism, and the most blatant thrusting and bullying, to which a period of 'rugged individualism' gave scope. *Gradgrind*, in fact, marries his daughter to *Bounderby*. Yet he is represented as a kind of *James Mill*; an intellectual who gives his children, on theory, an education that reminds us in a very significant way of the *Autobiography* of the younger *Mill*. And it is hardly possible to question the justice of this vision of the tendency of *James Mill's* kind of Utilitarianism, so blind in its onesidedness, so unaware of its bent and its blindness. The generous uncalculating spontaneity, the warm flow of life, towards which *Gradgrindery*, practical and intellectual, must be hostile, is symbolized by *Sleary's* Horse-riding.

The richness in symbolic significance of *Hard Times* is far from adequately suggested by this account. The prose is that of one of the greatest masters of English, and the dialogue – very much a test in such an undertaking – is consummate; beautifully natural in its stylization. But there is only one *Hard Times* in the Dickensian *œuvre*.

Though the greatness of *Hard Times* passed unnoticed, Dickens couldn't fail to have a wide influence. We have remarked his presence in *The Secret Agent*. It is there again, in a minor way, in *George Eliot*, in some of her less felicitous characterization; and it is there in *Henry James*, most patently, perhaps, in *The Princess Casamassima*, but most importantly in *Roderick Hudson*.²³ It is there once more, and even more interestingly, in *D. H. Lawrence*, in *The Lost Girl*. The ironic humour, and the presentation in general, in the first part of that book bear a clear relation to the Dickensian, but are incomparably more mature, and belong to a total serious significance.

I take the opportunity, at this point, to remark parenthetically, that, whereas Dickens's greatness has been confirmed by time, it is quite otherwise with his rival. 'It is usual', says *Santayana*, 'to compare Dickens with Thackeray, which is like comparing the grape with the gooseberry; there are obvious points of resemblance, and the gooseberry has some superior qualities of its own; but you can't make red wine of it.' It seems to me that *Thackeray's* place is fairly enough indicated, even if his peculiar quality isn't precisely defined, by inverting a phrase I

servant of life he saw to be necessary. Writing to Edward Garnett of the work that was to become *Women in Love* he says: 'It is very different from *Sons and Lovers*: written in another language almost. I shall be sorry if you don't like it, but am prepared. I shan't write in the same manner as *Sons and and Lovers* again, I think – in that hard, violent style full of sensation and presentation.'²⁶

Describing at length what he is trying to do he says:

You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable *ego* of the character. There is another *ego*, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we've been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single radically unchanged element. (Like as diamond and coal are the same pure simple element of carbon. The ordinary novel would trace the history of the diamond – but I say, 'Diamond, what! This is carbon.' And my diamond might be coal or soot, and my theme is carbon.) You must not say my novel is shaky – it is not perfect, because I am not expert in what I want to do. But it is the real thing, say what you like. And I shall get my reception, if not now, then before long. Again I say, don't look for the development of the novel to follow the lines of certain characters: the characters fall into the form of some other rhythmic form, as when one draws a fiddle-bow across a fine tray delicately sanded, the sand takes lines unknown.²⁷

He is a most daring and radical innovator in 'form', method, technique. And his innovations and experiments are dictated by the most serious and urgent kind of interest in life. This is the spirit of it:

Do you know Cassandra in Aeschylus and Homer? She is one of the world's great figures, and what the Greeks and Agamemnon did to her is symbolic of what mankind has done to her since – raped and despoiled her, to their own rum. It is not your brain that you must trust to, nor your will – but to that fundamental pathetic faculty for receiving the hidden waves that come from the depths of life, and for transferring them to the unreceptive world. It is something which happens below the consciousness, and below the range of the will – it is something which is unrecognizable and frustrated and destroyed.²⁸

It is a spirit that, for all the unlikeness, relates Lawrence closely to George Eliot.²⁹ He writes, again, to Edward Garnett:³⁰

You see – you tell me I am half a Frenchman and one-eighth a Cockney. But that isn't it. I have very often the vulgarity and disagreeableness of the

common people, as you say Cockney, and I may be a Frenchman. But primarily I am a passionately religious man, and my novels must be written from the depth of my religious experience. That I must keep to, because I can only work like that. And my Cockneyism and commonness are only when the deep feeling doesn't find its way out, and a sort of jeer comes instead, and sentimentality and purplism. But you should see the religious, earnest, suffering man in me first, and then the flippant or common things after. Mrs Garnett says I have no true nobility – with all my cleverness and charm. But that is not true. It is there, in spite of all the littlenesses and commonnesses.

It is this spirit, by virtue of which he can truly say that what he writes must be written from the depth of his religious experience, that makes him, in my opinion, so much more significant in relation to the past and future, so much more truly creative as a technical inventor, an innovator, a master of language, than James Joyce. I know that Mr T. S. Eliot has found in Joyce's work something that recommends Joyce to him as positively religious in tendency (see *After Strange Gods*). But it seems plain to me that there is no organic principle determining, informing, and controlling into a vital whole, the elaborate analogical structure, the extraordinary variety of technical devices, the attempts at an exhaustive rendering of consciousness, for which *Ulysses* is remarkable, and which got it accepted by a cosmopolitan literary world as a new start. It is rather, I think, a dead end, or at least a pointer to disintegration – a view strengthened by Joyce's own development (for I think it significant and appropriate that *Work in Progress – Finnegans Wake*, as it became – should have engaged the interest of the inventor of Basic English).

It is true that we can point to the influence of Joyce in a line of writers to which there is no parallel issuing from Lawrence. But I find here further confirmation of my view. For I think that in these writers, in whom a regrettable (if minor) strain of Mr Eliot's influence seems to me to join with that of Joyce, we have, in so far as we have anything significant, the wrong kind of reaction against liberal idealism.³¹ I have in mind writers in whom Mr Eliot has expressed an interest in strongly favourable terms: Djuna Barnes of *Nightwood*, Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell of *The Black Book*. In these writers – at any rate in the last two (and the first seems to me insignificant) – the spirit of what we are offered affects me as being essentially a desire, in Laurentian phrase, to 'do dirt' on life. It seems to me important that one should, in all modesty, bear one's witness in these matters. 'One must speak for life and growth, amid all this mass of destruction and disintegration.'³² This is Lawrence,

and it is the spirit of all his work. It is the spirit of the originality that gives his novels their disconcerting quality, and gives them the significance of works of genius.

I am not contending that he isn't, as a novelist, open to a great deal of criticism, or that his achievement is as a whole satisfactory (the potentiality being what it was). He wrote his later books far too hurriedly. But I know from experience that it is far too easy to conclude that his very aim and intention condemned him to artistic unsatisfactoriness. I am thinking in particular of two books at which he worked very hard, and in which he developed his disconcertingly original interests and approaches – *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. Re-read, they seem to me astonishing works of genius, and very much more largely successful than they did when I read them (say) fifteen years ago. I still think that *The Rainbow* doesn't build up sufficiently into a whole. But I shouldn't be quick to offer my criticism of *Women in Love*, being pretty sure that I should in any case have once more to convict myself of stupidity and habit-blindness on later re-reading. And after these novels there comes, written, perhaps, with an ease earned by this hard work done, a large body of short stories and *nouvelles* that are as indubitably successful works of genius as any the world has to show.

I have, then, given my hostages. What I think and judge I have stated as responsibly and clearly as I can. Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Conrad, and D. H. Lawrence: the great tradition of the English novel is *there*.

'Note: The Brontës'

It is tempting to retort that there is only one Brontë. Actually, Charlotte, though claiming no part in the great line of English fiction (it is significant that she couldn't see why any value should be attached to Jane Austen), has a permanent interest of a minor kind. She had a remarkable talent that enabled her to do something first-hand, and new in the rendering of personal experience, above all in *Villette*.

The genius, of course, was Emily. I have said nothing about *Wuthering Heights* because that astonishing work seems to me a kind of sport. It may, all the same, very well have had some influence of an essentially undetectable kind: she broke completely, and in the most challenging way, both with the Scott tradition that imposed on the novelist a romantic resolution of his themes, and with the tradition coming down from the eighteenth century that demanded a plane-mirror

reflection of the surface of 'real' life. Out of her a minor tradition comes, to which belongs, most notably, *The House with the Green Shutters*.

1. The novelist who has not been revived is Disraeli. Yet, though he is not one of the great novelists, he is so alive and intelligent as to deserve permanent currency, at any rate in the trilogy *Coningsby*, *Sybil*, and *Tancred*: his own interests as expressed in these books – the interests of a supremely intelligent politician who has a sociologist's understanding of civilization and its movement in his time – are so mature.

2. See note 'The Brontes', at the end of this chapter

3. Characteristic of the confusion I am contending against is the fashion (for which the responsibility seems to go back to Virginia Woolf and Mr E. M. Forster) of talking of *Moll Flanders* as a 'great novel'. Defoe was a remarkable writer, but all that need be said about him as a novelist was said by Leslie Stephen in *Hours in a Library* (First Series). He made no pretension to practising the novelist's art, and matters little as an influence. In fact, the only influence that need be noted is that represented by the use made of him in the nineteen-twenties by the practitioners of the fantastic *conte* (or pseudo-moral fable) with its empty pretence of significance.

Associated with this use of Defoe is the use that was made in much the same *milieu* of Sterne, in whose irresponsible (and nasty) trifling, regarded as in some way extraordinarily significant and mature, was found a sanction for attributing value to other trifling.

The use of Bunyan by T. F. Powys is quite another matter. It is a mark of the genuine nature of Mr Powys's creative gift (his work seems to me not to have had due recognition) that he has been able to achieve a kind of traditional relation to Bunyan – especially, of course, in *Mr Weston's Good Wine*. Otherwise there is, little that can be said with confidence about Bunyan as an influence. And yet we know him to have been for two centuries one of the most frequented of all classics, and in such a way that he counts immeasurably in the English-speaking consciousness. It is, perhaps, worth saying that his influence would tend strongly to reinforce the un-Flaubertian quality of the line of English classical fiction (Bunyan, Lord David Cecil might point out – See note 10 – was a Puritan), as well as to cooperate with the Jonsonian tradition of morally significant typicality in characters.

4. For the relation of Jane Austen to other writers see the essay by Q. D. Leavis, 'A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings', in *Scrutiny*, Vol. X, No. 1.

5. Scott was primarily a kind of inspired folk-lonst, qualified to have done in fiction something analogous to the ballad-opera: the only live part of *Redgauntlet* now is 'Wandering Willie's Tale', and 'The Two Drovers' remains in esteem while the heroics of the historical novels can no longer command respect. He was a great and very intelligent man; but, not having the creative writer's interest in literature, he made no serious attempt to work out his own form and break away from the bad tradition of the eighteenth-century romance. Of his books, *The*

Heart of Midlothian comes the nearest to being a great novel, but hardly is that: too many allowances and deductions have to be made. Out of Scott a bad tradition came. It spoiled Fennimore Cooper, who had new and first-hand interests and the makings of a distinguished novelist. And with Stevenson it took on 'literary' sophistication and fine writing.

6. "As for the revolt against Nature," he continued, "that, too, has its uses. If it conduces to the cult of the stylized, the conventionalized, the artificial, just for their own sakes, it also, more broadly, makes for civilization."

"Civilization?" I asked "At what point between barbarism and decadence does civilization reign? If a civilized community be defined as one where you find aesthetic preoccupations, subtle thought, and polished intercourse, is civilization necessarily desirable? Aesthetic preoccupations are not inconsistent with a wholly inadequate conception of the range and power of art, thought may be subtle and yet trivial; and polished intercourse may be singularly uninteresting".' L H Myers, *The Root and the Flower*, page 418.

Myers hasn't the great novelist's technical interest in method and presentment; he slips very easily into using the novel as a *vehicle*. That is, we feel that he is not primarily a novelist. Yet he is sufficiently one to have made of *The Root and the Flower* a very remarkable novel. Anyone seriously interested in literature is likely to have found the first reading a memorable experience and to have found also that repeated re-readings have not exhausted the interest.

7. See 'Lady Susan into Mansfield Park' by Q.D. Leavis in *Scrutiny*, Vol. X, No. 2.

8. D. W. Harding deals illuminatingly with this matter in 'Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen' (see *Scrutiny*, Vol. VIII, No.4).

9. *Phoenix*, page 308.

10. She is a moralist and a highbrow, the two handicaps going together. 'Her humour is less affected by her intellectual approach. Jokes, thank heaven, need not be instructive.' – *Early Victorian Novelists*, page 299.

11. It is perhaps worth insisting that Peacock is more than that too. He is not at all in the same class as the Norman Douglas of *South Wind and They Went*. In his ironical treatment of contemporary society and civilization he is seriously applying serious standards, so that his books, which are obviously not novels in the same sense as Jane Austen's, have a permanent life as light reading – indefinitely re-readable – for minds with mature interests.

12. He can't have failed to note with interest that *Emma* fulfils, by anticipation, a prescription of his own: everything is presented through Emma's dramatized consciousness, and the essential effects depend on that.

13. New Directions, Norfolk, Conn. (1938). To insist that James is in the English tradition is not to deny that he is in an American tradition too. He is in the tradition that includes Hawthorne and Melville. He is related to Hawthorne even more closely than Mr Winters suggests. A study of the very early work shows Hawthorne as a major influence – as *the* major influence. The influence is apparent there in James's use of symbolism; and this use develops into

to me as regards Conrad something like an immense respect for his character and achievements I cannot remember his exact words, but they were something to the effect that Conrad's works impressed him very disagreeably, but he could find no technical fault or awkwardness about them.' – *Return to Yesterday*, page 24.

22 Rather, childhood memory and the potent family-reading experience must be invoked to excuse what is absurd in this paragraph. Others will testify to the power of the 'interference'. I now think that, if any one writer can be said to have created the modern novel, it is Dickens.

23 . See [here](#)

24 Arthur Mizener's essay, 'Jude the Obscure as a Tragedy', in the Thomas Hardy Centennial Issue of the *Southern Review* (Summer 1940), puts interestingly the case for a serious estimate of the book.

25 . See *Aspects of the Novel*. And here is James on *Lord Ormont and his Aminta*: 'Moreover, I have vowed not to open *Lourdes* till I shall have closed with a furious final bang the unspeakable *Lord Ormont*, which I have been reading at the maximum rate of ten pages – ten insufferable and unprofitable pages – a day. It fills me with a critical rage, an artistic fury, utterly blighting in me the indispensable principle of *respect*. I have finished, at this rate, but the first volume – whereof I am moved to declare that I doubt if any equal quantity of extravagant verbiage, of airs and graces, of phrases and attitudes, of obscurities and alembications, ever *started* less their subject, ever contributed less of a statement – told the reader less of what the reader needs to know. All the elaborate predicates of exposition without the ghost of a nominative to hook themselves to; and not a difficulty met, not a figure presented, not a scene constituted – not a dim shadow condensing once either into audible or into visible reality – making you hear for an instant the tap of its feet on the earth. Of course there are pretty things, but for what they are they come so much too dear, and so many of the profundities and tortuosities prove when threshed out to be only pretentious statements of the very simplest propositions.' – To Edmund Gosse: *The Letters of Henry James*. Vol. I, page 224.

26 . *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, page 172.

27 . *Letters*, page 198.

28 . *ibid.*, page 232.

29 . Lawrence too has been called a Puritan.

30 . *Letters*, page 190.

31 . See D. H. Lawrence's *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, especially Chapter XI.

32 . *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, page 256.

CHAPTER 2

GEORGE ELIOT

The Early Phase

THERE is general agreement that an appraisal of George Eliot must be a good deal preoccupied with major discriminations – that the body of her work exhibits within itself striking differences not merely of kind, but between the more and the less satisfactory, and exhibits them in such a way that the history of her art has to be seen as something less happy in its main lines than just an unfolding of her genius, a prosperous development of her distinctive powers, with growing maturity. It is generally assumed that this aspect of her performance is significantly related to the fact of her having displayed impressive intellectual gifts outside her art, so that she was a distinguished figure in the world of Herbert Spencer and the *Westminster Review* before she became a novelist. And there is something like a unanimity to the effect that it is distinctive of her, among great novelists, to be peculiarly addicted to moral preoccupations.

The force of this last – what it amounts to or intends, and the significance it has for criticism – is elusive; and it seems well to start with a preliminary glance at what, from his hours with the critics, the reader is likely to recall as a large established blur across the field of vision. Henry James seems to me to have shown finer intelligence than anyone else in writing about George Eliot, and he, in his review of the *Cross Life* of her, tells us that, for her, the novel ‘was not primarily a picture of life, capable of deriving a high value from its form, but a moralized fable, the last word of a philosophy endeavouring to teach by example’.¹ The blur is seen here in that misleading antithesis, which, illusory as it is, James’s commentary insists on. What, we ask, is the ‘form’ from which a ‘picture of life’ derives its value? As we should expect, the term ‘aesthetic’, with its trail of confusion, turns up in the neighbourhood (it is a term the literary critic would do well to abjure). James notes, as characterizing ‘that side of George Eliot’s nature which was weakest’, the ‘absence of free aesthetic life’, and he says that her

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