

Realism and the Contemporary Novel

Raymond Williams

" WE are suffering, obviously, from the decay and disrepute of the realistic novel, which for our purposes (since we are, and know ourselves to be, individuals *within* a society) ought clearly to be revived. Of course it cannot be George Eliot again, nor even Lawrence, though the roots are in both. But there, I think, is the direction."

When I wrote this, recently, in the course of a review of *The Uses of Literacy*, I knew that I should soon be called on to substantiate or clarify it. For on the one hand, it goes against most current critical thinking, and provokes the reaction, which I soon heard, that the realistic novel "went out with the hansom cab." On the other hand, I knew myself what a powerful, and yet vague, word "realism" can be: it is easy to declare in favour of it, yet difficult to say what exactly is implied.

In fact, to make my whole case, I need more space than I had then or have now, but this is a critical time for the argument to appear, and it seems worth risking even a brief restatement, as a contribution to an important contemporary argument. I will try to say what I mean by the realistic novel, and why I think its revival is necessary. My full argument can appear later, but there may be points here that are worth an immediate following-up.

The novel is not so much a literary form as a whole literature in itself. Within its wide boundaries, there is room for almost every kind of contemporary writing. Great harm is done to the tradition of fiction, and to the necessary critical discussion of it, if "the novel" is equated with any one kind of prose work. It was such an inadequate equation which made Tolstoy say, of *War and Peace*: "It is not a novel." A form which in fact includes *Middlemarch* and *Auto-da-Fe*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Rainbow* and *The Magic Mountain*, is indeed, as I have said, more like a whole literature. When I say, then, that I believe in a particular direction—the revival of the realistic novel—I do not mean that this whole vast form should be confined to one particular kind of work. I mean only that there is a formal gap in the literature of our own times, which makes it incapable of adequately expressing one kind of experience—a kind of experience which in fact I find particularly important. It was to bridge this gap that I made my proposal, and the reference to George Eliot and Lawrence was an attempt at brief indication of the kind of experience I had in mind.

To put it in more general terms, I mean this. There is a kind of novel which in fact creates and judges the quality of a whole way of living in terms of the qualities of persons. The balance involved in this achievement is perhaps the most important thing about it. It looks at first sight so general a thing—the sort of thing most novels do. It is what *War and Peace* does; what *Middlemarch* does; what *The Rainbow* does. The distinction of this tradition is that it offers a valuing creation of a whole way of life, a society, that is larger than any of the individuals composing it, and at the same time valuing creations of individual human beings, who while belonging to and affected by and helping to define this way of life, are also, in their own terms, absolute ends in themselves. Neither element, neither the society nor the individual, is there as a priority. The society is not a

background against which the personal relationships are studied, nor are the individuals merely illustrations of aspects of the way of life. I call this the realistic tradition because it seems to me to represent a particular kind of mature realism in experience. This, I am saying, is how life is, how I see it when I am trying to see it whole. Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life, and yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms. We have to attend with our whole senses to every aspect of the general life, yet the centre of value is always in the individual human person—not any one isolated person, but the many persons who are the reality of the general life. Tolstoy and George Eliot, in particular, often said, in much these terms, that it was this view of life they were trying to realize.

Now I think it is a fact that this tradition, as a tradition, has broken down. But I don't mean, of course, to tie it to any particular style. The kind of realistic (actually naturalistic) description that "went out with the hansom cab" is in no way essential to it; it was even perhaps a substitute for it. You don't realize this vision by detailed stocktaking descriptions of shops or back-parlours or station waiting-rooms. You may use these, as elements in your action, but they are not the essence of "realism" as I understand it. If they are put in, for the sake of accurate description as such, they may in fact destroy the balance that is the essence of this method: they may, for example, transfer attention from the people to the things. It was actually this very feeling, that in this kind of fully-furnished novel everything was present but actual individual life, that led, in the 1920s, to the disrepute of realism. The extreme reaction is in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, where all the furniture, and even the physical bodies, have gone out of the window, and we are left with voices and feelings, voices in the air—an equally damaging unbalance, as we can now see. In general outline, the tradition can be seen in this way, as the division of what I call the realistic novel, creating the substance and quality of a way of life in terms of the substance and qualities of persons, into two separate traditions, the "social" novel and the "personal" novel. In the social novel there may be accurate observation and description of the general life, the aggregation; in the personal novel there may be accurate observation and description of persons, the units. Each lacks a dimension, for the way of life is neither aggregation nor unit, but a whole indivisible process.

I will give some instances of each kind, and of a further important sub-division within each. I must emphasize that in each case I am concerned only with works which resemble the realistic novel; that there are other valid kinds I admit. There is then, first, the descriptive social novel, the documentary. This creates, as priority, a general way of life, a particular social or working community. Inserted into this, of course, are characters sometimes quite carefully drawn. But what we say about such novels is that if we want to know about life in a mining town, or on a merchant ship, or in a ballet school, or on a patrol in Burma, this is the book. In fact, many novels of this kind are valuable; the good documentary is nearly always interesting. It is even important that novels of this kind should go on being written, and with

the greatest possible variety in setting. Yet the dimension that we miss is obvious: the characters are miners, soldiers, dancers, first—illustrations of the way of life. It is not the emphasis I have been trying to describe, where the persons are of absolute interest in themselves, and are yet seen within a whole way of life. The dimension, moreover, is not to be gained by the usual arbitrary devices—inserting, say, into a novel about atomic scientists (cf. Snow's *The New Men*) a little perfunctory common life, usually, in fact, a little usual sex. Of all current kinds of novel, this kind, at its best, is apparently nearest the realistic tradition, but, if I have made myself clear, the crucial distinction will be ordinarily apparent in actual reading: the social-descriptive function is in fact the shaping priority.

The future-story

A very lively kind of social novel, quite different from this, is now significantly popular. The tenor, here, is not description, but the finding and materialization of a *formula* about society. That is to say, from the sum of social experience, a particular pattern is abstracted, and a society created from that. The simplest examples are in the field of the future-story, where the "future" device (usually only a device, for nearly always it is quite obviously contemporary society that is being written about) removes the ordinary tension between the chosen pattern and normal observation. Such novels as *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Fahrenheit 242*, are powerful social fiction, in which a pattern taken from contemporary society is materialized, as a whole, in another time or place. Other examples are Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors*, and nearly all serious "science fiction"; most of these, characteristically, are written to resemble realistic novels, and operate in the same essential terms. Again, many novels of this kind are valuable, though it happens that I dislike the ordinary formula at their roots, which is customarily the story of a virtuous individual or small personal group in opposition to a vile society. It is easy, by selection and extension, to make the society vile, and it has always been the easiest thing in the world to make the individual, me, virtuous. Much of the action of these stories is a release of existing personal and social (particularly class) tensions, but I say release, and not working-out, because ordinarily the device subtly alters the tensions, places them in a pre-selected light, so that it is not so much that they are understood but indulged. The experience of isolation, of alienation, and of self-exile is a vital part of the contemporary structure of feeling, and any contemporary realistic novel would have to come to real terms with it. (It is ironic, incidentally, that it was come to terms with, and worked to a resolution very different from the contemporary formula of "exile versus masses, stalemate," both in *Crime and Punishment* and, through Bezukhov, in *War and Peace*). Yet, when this has been said, the novels are lively because they are about lively social feelings. The dimension they lack is that of a substantial, rather than a formula, society. The persons, also, are commonly lay figures, defined primarily by their function in the formula.

I have said then, in outline, that the realistic novel divided into the "social" and the "personal" novel, and that the social novel, in our time, has further divided into social documentary and social formula. The same division and sub-division can be seen in the "personal" novel. On the one hand, there are the novels which describe, often subtly and carefully, selected personal relationships. These are often very like *parts* of the realistic novel as I have described it, and there is work of great substance and sincerity within this mode. Forster's *Passage to India* is an example of this kind

with the traces of the older balance still clearly visible, yet belongs, in a high place, in this divided kind, because of elements in the Indian society of the novel which romanticize the actual society in the direction of the needs of certain of the characters. This is a quite common result in this "personal" kind: a society, a general way of life, is apparently there, but is in fact often a highly personalized landscape, to clarify or frame an individual portrait, rather than a country within which the individuals are actually contained. Graham Greene's social settings are obvious examples of this: his Brighton, West Africa, Mexico and Indo-China have major elements in common which relate not to their actual ways of life but to the needs of his characters and of his own emotional pattern. There is a lack of dimension similar to that in the social-descriptive novel, but in a different direction. There the characters were aspects of the society; here the society is an aspect of the characters. The emphasis we look for is that in which both the general way of life and the individual persons are seen as there and absolute.

Of course, in many personal novels, often very good in their own terms, the general way of life does not appear even in this partial way, but as a simple back-cloth, of shopping and the outbreak of war and buses and odd minor characters from another social class. I don't wish to deny that such novels can be valuable. They are often excellent when they are the result of deliberate selection, deliberate concentration, for there is of course a vast field of significant experience, in just these terms, which can be excitingly explored. But it seems to me that for every case of conscious selection (as in Proust, say, where the concentration is entirely justified and yet produces, obliquely, a master-portrait of a general way of life) there are perhaps a hundred cases where the restriction is simply a failure of consciousness, a failure to realize the extent to which the substance of a general way of life actively affects the closest personal experience. Of course if, to these writers, society has become the dull abstract thing of the social novel at its worst, it is not surprising that they do not see why it should concern them. They insist on the people as people first, and not as social units, and they are quite right to do so. What is missed, however, is the element of common substance, and this is often amusingly revealed in the sudden drop in sensibility when someone with a different social life-style—a charwoman, say, as they put it, reverting now suddenly to the social novel's categories—is as a person, but they will not have her as a person, encountered. We are people, you sometimes hear between the lines, to us these things are important. And this is not so much social snobbery, though it can be diagnosed as that, as the failure to realize the nature of the general social element in *their own* lives. We are people, just like that; the rest is the world or society or politics or something, dull things that are written about in the newspapers. But the fact is that we are people and people within a society: that whole view was at the centre of the realistic novel.

"Personal formula" Novel

The most substantial novels of this century include, nevertheless, a good number of the personal-descriptive works that I have been discussing. So very much can be done, in this kind, even if, as I have been arguing, it is not all that we need. But in fact, over the last generation, there has been, as I see it, a swing away from this kind of personal novel, to the other personal kind, the novel of the "personal formula." As in the social novel, a particular pattern is abstracted from the sum of experience, and persons are created from that. Often this is the basis of powerful, and in its own terms valid, fiction; more often, however, we can

call this the fiction of special pleading. In either case this is usually (apart from obviously non-realistic works) the kind of novel which can be summed up by saying that it only takes one person seriously, though then often very seriously indeed. There has, of course, been fine work in this kind of personal novel. Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* is not only this, but contains it as a main emphasis. And to mention this remarkable work is to remind ourselves of the actual gain in intensity, the real development of the form, which this emphasis allowed. A world is actualized on one man's senses: not narrated, or held at arm's length, but taken as it is lived. Joyce showed us the enormous possibilities of this when in *Ulysses* he actualized a world, not through one person, but through three; there are three ways of seeing, three worlds, of Stephen, Bloom, and Molly, yet the three worlds, as in fact, compose one world, the whole world of the novel. I don't mean that *Ulysses* maintains this balance throughout; it is mainly in the first third of the book that the essential composition is done, with the last section as a coda. Yet here was the realistic tradition in a new form, altered in technique but continuous in experience.

Amis and Wain

Since *Ulysses*, this achievement has been diluted, as the technique has also been diluted. Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* is an interesting example, for in it one way of seeing has been isolated, and the world fitted to that. This analysis is also the key to the popular new kind of novel represented by Amis's *Lucky Jim* and *That Uncertain Feeling*, and Wain's *Living in the Present*. The paradox of these novels is that on the one hand they seem the most real kind of contemporary writing—they were welcomed because they were so like our actual feelings—and yet on the other hand their final version of reality is parodic and farcical. The fact illustrates very well the general dilemma: these writers start with real personal feelings, but to sustain and substantiate them, in their given form, the world of action in which they operate has to be pressed, as it were inevitably, towards caricature. To set these feelings in our actual world, rather than in this world farcically transformed at crisis, would be in fact to question the feelings, to go on from them to a very difficult adjustment to reality. Instead of adjustment, what we actually get is a phantasy release: swearing on the 'phone, giving a mock lecture, finding a Buchan-type figure on which social aggression can be concentrated. Because these are our liveliest writers, they illustrate our contemporary difficulty most clearly. The gap between our feelings and our social observation is dangerously wide.

Special pleading

The fiction of special pleading can be seen in its clearest form in those many contemporary novels which, taking one person's feelings and needs as absolute, create other persons in these sole terms. The method goes back to Charlotte Brontë, and flourishes in the now significantly popular first-person narrative, which is normally used simply for this end. A variation is Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*, in which the persons are in fact presented objectively, but then made to act in accordance with the phantasy of the central character. Bowen's *Heat of the Day* follows the same essential pattern, of persons who exist primarily as elements in a central character's emotional landscape, although here there is no first-person narrative, and there is even some careful descriptive realism, to make the special pleading less stark. The same pattern, finally, can be extended into what looks like a realistic novel of an older type, Wilson's *Anglo-Saxon*

Attitudes, where the broad intention of realism is obvious, yet where finally only one character is fully and consistently observed, while the others fall away into graded levels of caricature, according to their distance from him.

I offer this fourfold classification—social description, social formula, personal description, personal formula—as a way of beginning any general analysis of the contemporary novel insofar as it offers to describe, in direct terms, some part of contemporary life; and as a way of defining, by contrast, the realistic tradition which, in varying ways, these kinds have replaced. I have had to make my judgments in an arbitrary way, in this brief account, though in fact the detailed analyses came first, and it was only later that I saw this classification emerging. The question now is whether these kinds correspond to some altered reality, leaving the older tradition as really irrelevant as the hansom cab, or whether in fact they are the symptoms of some very deep crisis in experience, which throws up these talented kinds of work, yet persists, unexplored, and leaves us essentially dissatisfied. I think the evidence points to the latter, yet I am not prepared to say that the abandonment of the realistic novel is in some way wilful; that these writers are deliberately turning away from a great tradition, with the perversity that many ordinary readers assign to them. The crisis in experience is too deep for any simple, blaming explanation. But what, then, is this crisis, in its general nature?

There are certain immediate clarifying factors. The realistic novel needs, obviously, a genuine community: a community of persons linked not merely by one kind of relationship—work, friendship, family—but by many, interlocking kinds. It is obviously difficult, in our society, to find a community of this sort. Where *Middlemarch* is a complex of personal, family and working relationships, and draws its whole strength from their interaction in an indivisible process, the links between persons in most contemporary novels are relatively single, temporary, discontinuous. And this was a change in society, at least in that part of society most nearly available to most novelists, before it was a change in literary form. Again, related to this but affected by other powerful factors, the characteristic experience of our century is that of asserting and preserving an individuality, as contrasted with the characteristic earlier experience of finding a place and making a settlement. The ordinary Victorian novel ends, as every parodist knows, with a series of settlements, of new engagements and formal relationships, whereas the ordinary 20th century novel ends with a man going away on his own, having extricated himself from a dominating situation, and found himself in so doing. Again, this actually happened, before it was recorded in literature. In a time of great change, this kind of extrication and discovery was a necessary and valuable movement: the recorded individual histories amount to a common history. Yet still, at this date, the movement we consistently celebrate is the movement of breaking away, and we do this at a time when so much of the formal emphasis of our social thinking is on closer community, closer mutual responsibility, closer common effort and need. Of course the old establishment lingers, often very powerfully, and the breakaway has continually to be made. Yet it is still the paradox of our generation that we call for community and yet praise the escape from it, call for the feelings that unite yet find that unity only in the common desire to get away. When social profession and individual record diverge, there is a dangerous gap in consciousness, and this, in fact, is the present crisis of realism.

The gap might be filled by ideas, by new interpretations, by the discovery of allegiances in the continuing transformation of society. Yet, if I am right, this is not a gap that can be bridged by will. We are crippled by the inadequacies of

our society, yet we will not give up, for anyone, the breakaway values that are in fact our living experience. The necessary adjustment is so great that it involves the most difficult kind of integration: the recovery, in fact, of that kind of feeling about persons and a whole way of life which I described as marking the realistic novel. It is here, I am arguing, that the realistic novel is so important. We need this recovery of wholeness, for the most ordinary business of living, yet the necessary learning and adjustment in experience can only take place in ways which the realistic novel alone can record. If the recovery could be set down here in a formula, the position would be different. But it can only be set down, if at all, in the whole terms which the realistic novel makes possible: where all the persons are of absolute value in themselves, and where their qualities are the qualities of the common way of life. The stages to this will be slow, but there, I think, is the direction: a direction in experience which may again transform the novel.

For the novel is not dead, cannot be replaced by sociology on the one hand or psychology on the other, or by any combination of these in the head. We have good novels of our own times, recording feelings and descriptions with the novel's special immediacy. What we have to look for is the recovery of that interpenetration, idea into feeling, person into community, change into resettlement, which George Eliot made living in *Middlemarch*, Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, and which we need, as a growing point, in our own divided time. A particular responsibility, in my view, falls to those who have known, in their growing-up, this kind of close community, and who have known, later, within these values, the change and readjustment of a characteristic social mobility. What they live out may be in fact our future, the actual and probable direction of our society. What they can record, if they are true to their whole experience, may in fact be the breakthrough, in society and in the novel.

The contemporary novelist, Walter Scott, reviewing *Emma* in 1816 described it as "keeping close to common incidents, and to such characters as occupy the ordinary walks of life" and, he continued, "Emma has even less story than [Jane Austen's] preceding novels." This may seem like an odd kind of compliment but Scott meant it as the highest praise. Ten years later, in March 1826, he wrote in his diary: "Read again and for the third time at least Miss Austen's very finely written novel of *Pride and Prejudice*. Combining realism, romance and comedy. To say that Austen is a realist as a writer is not quite the same as saying she describes society as it really is. Her novels are also romantic comedies.