



Editor's Study

ALMOST we might say that the writing of fiction is properly a feminine rather than a masculine accomplishment. The great story-tellers in prose and verse, where invention and a broad range of the constructive faculty are necessary to the entertainment, have always been men. But fiction, as we moderns understand it, is a more delicate and intimate portraiture of real life, quite alien to the story-telling art, and more native to women; it began in the kind of letters women wrote, naturally, picturing, no stray thought interfering with direct embodiment.

In the play the story is removed by the dramatic art from the plane of ordinary life, and by the distinctive requirements of that art—elaboration of plan, concentration of action, and variety and detail of characterization—from the straightforward method of the story-teller. An illusion is to be created and maintained, involving the acceptance of the playwright's premises by the audience. Nearly all of the successful plays have been written by men.

The earliest fiction—all before the middle of the eighteenth century—was written by men, but it was not fiction in the modern sense; it did not attempt real social or individual portraiture. No woman would ever have been tempted to undertake what was so magnificently done by Apuleius, or Rabelais, or Cervantes, or Lesage, or by John Lyly and Robert Greene in the Elizabethan era, or by Defoe and Swift in the early eighteenth century. Even Steele's and Addison's character-sketches were as much beyond her natural inclination as all their essays were. Their essays were social, as distinguished from those of a more speculative order in the preceding century—such as Cowley's, Bacon's, and Sir Thomas Browne's—they dealt with manners and so inclined to the concrete presentment of types of human character, preparing the way for the social novel.

"Isaac Bickerstaffe" is even concerned with affecting domestic scenes, feelingly portrayed, but always with the distinctly masculine detachment, which is still more evident in the portraits of Sir Roger de Coverley and Will Honeycomb. The humorous whimsicalities so characteristic of Addison in sketches of this sort, and perpetuated later, with variations due to individual temperament, by Fielding, Sterne, Lamb, and Thackeray, have never been adopted by women in essay or fiction. The few women who wrote essays in the eighteenth century, even after the essay had become more picturesque and concrete, were more formal and didactic and far less entertaining than men. In our own day Vernon Lee—not to mention other women who have won distinction in this field—has written essays which in matter and manner have not been surpassed by her masculine contemporaries.

It must be conceded that, as a rule, women, since their advent into literature, have shown an aversion to essay-writing—at least to that kind which gains a permanent place in literature. It is a fact significant of disinclination rather than of disability. Women have chosen to leap directly from letter-writing to fiction, finding no compelling allurements in the intermediate field of the essay.

Fiction, as we of to-day understand it, is an entirely new art of expression, meeting a new need; and what is new in it has been creatively developed chiefly by women. We do not mean that they initiated this new art, or each new note marking the points of departure from an older style of fiction; on the contrary, we think that such initiative must be conceded to men. In the generic sense men are more original than women, even determining feminine fashions. It is the originality of the master, and in the arts men have been the masters—in this new art of fiction as in all others. In the representative arts, including the drama, this mastery was essential to the supreme

effect. It was equally effective in storytelling for the simple purpose of entertainment. But in the representation of life by creative embodiment of its reality—by creative realism, for it comes to just that—this mastery was in the way; not because of it, but in spite of it, have men been creative realists in fiction.

When women began to write fiction they portrayed life as they saw it and felt it. They were quickly and keenly observant and had deep sensibility. They cherished intimacies with living things—brooding intimacies—and were naïvely creative of situation and character. They were not so much inclined as their brother novelists to freedom of adventure, to loose invention of incident, to elaboration of plot, or to the masterful exploitation of human passions. They were womanly, but they were eighteenth-century womanly, and we cannot say that they initiated or illustrated creative realism, or, indeed, that their work furnished convincing proof that fiction was distinctively a feminine accomplishment, though it strongly suggested woman's peculiar fitness for the deft, vivid, and truthful portrayal of social life.

Men had undertaken the novel of society and were followed by women who, in so far as they had any conscious aim, meant to follow in the path of Richardson. They were as much under the intellectual influences of their time as the men were, quite as sophisticated, within their range of thought, and not less the victims of the tyranny of abstractions. They were more formal moralists, and thus excluded from their fiction a wide range of vital human experience. They easily assumed the masculine detachment from the material they wrought with—though it was something less remote than the masculine—because the entanglements and involvements they bound and loosed were superficial, pertaining to social types in a rigidly classified order, and only lightly touching any adventure of the individual soul.

Woman had never got so far away from primitive naturalism as in that eighteenth century. Step by step she had been wrenched away from it by man's progressive civilization, until now she was stranded in the dry air of a Common Sense world which had accepted Pope as the

greatest of poets and was now yielding to the literary dictatorship of Doctor Johnson. In such an atmosphere her fiction gave no clear prophetic intimation of a new naturalism to come.

But even out of this dry ground the fruit of woman's imagination yielded native flavors. Woman in any age, if she creates at all, must confess to her peculiar natural bond, whatever may be her conscious aim or her environment, including the stimulus of masculine fellowship and inspiration. She has, as we have said, a brooding intimacy with living things; she has always had it, else there would never have been possible the domestication of animals. It may be that, in the mysterious course of heredity, only a small proportion of women have it, growing perhaps less with every generation, but at least those women who create, in life or literature, must have it and, with it, the sense begotten of it which invests the commonest thing that life has dwelt in, or has touched, with the sacredness of an ancient familiarity.

In woman this heritage is one of feeling and, in her creative work, is shown in close and natural intimacies, vivid description and portraiture of what is nearly seen and felt, fancies bred in the heart, and an almost physiological architectonic. Her lightest gossip is born of vital sympathy. All this, along with animately natural graces and humors, is apparent in her eighteenth-century fiction, mingled with an intolerable deal of sophistry, for which she was not accountable. She dealt with life directly, though externally and in typical representation, and we have, therefore, a feeling of reality in the portraiture, with no dramatic exaggeration, no caricature or distortion or grotesque whimsicality of any sort. If she did not disclose a new art of fiction she made it seem new by bringing to it fresh resources from her own nature, and through the development of these resources she made a distinct departure from the methods employed by her masculine contemporaries in the depiction of social life. She did not revolt against the old devices and, herself abounding in artifices, she consciously reinforced rather than resisted the artificial in literature, so that her every departure from it was inevitable rather

than contemplated—a fresh path that she must take because she could take no other. This necessity proved to be a blessed limitation, a divine opportunity, the condition of a peculiar and surpassing excellence.

It might reasonably have been expected that the protest against the formal civilization of the eighteenth century would have come from woman; but it was Rousseau who sounded the note of revolt; and the new Romanticism was initiated and developed by men and reached its high tide in the first quarter of the nineteenth century with but a slight and passive response from women, except as its mystical side appealed to a few of them, notably to Mrs. Radcliffe. It was just this side of the movement—its reversion to medievalism—which repelled Jane Austen, the finest and sanest artist in pre-Waverley fiction, who gave the old type of social portraiture its utmost naturalness and charm.

Romanticism helped to give fiction its modern subjectiveness. It laid stress upon individualism, and it developed, in philosophy, poetry, and criticism, surprising variations of individual genius, contrasting with the manifest uniformities of eighteenth-century literature in these fields. Conventions were relaxed. Religious and political movements among the people showed new impulses at work, subversive of long-established forms. Poetry and philosophy were transformed. But fiction, as a portraiture of contemporary social life, was violently arrested. The story-teller reasserted his claim. He does so in every age; but here the story-teller was Sir Walter Scott, a master-magician for entertainment who for many years had the monopoly of this ancient art. Generous as Scott was in the confession of his limitations as compared with Jane Austen; modestly as he professed to follow Miss Edgeworth in an attempt to do for Scotland what she had done for Ireland; gladly as he hailed Miss Ferrier as a sister artist in the Scottish field—yet he drove every woman novelist to cover, until the gentle emergence of Miss Mitford with *Our Village* in 1824, and, after that, there was no woman of distinction in English fiction before the middle of the century.

Scott, by virtue of his genius, deserved

to hold the field which he so splendidly enriched and glorified. For the moment he paralyzed novel-writing of the Fielding and even of the Jane Austen sort—the sort which concerns itself with contemporary manners, with the comedy sense of life—he turned to the past and told stories; and there had been no such masterly creation, not only of a story but of the living men and women enacting it, between his historical romances and Shakespeare's historical plays.

He was followed, not by women, but by men who also were story-tellers rather than novelists, in our modern sense of the novel—men like Ainsworth and Lever, G. P. R. James and Marryat. The novel proper was continued by Bulwer, Dickens, and Thackeray, all of whom entered the field at the beginning of the Victorian era—none of them prophetic of the creative realism of the next generation, though widely differing from the eighteenth-century society novelists to whom they were the legitimate successors. They met the needs, emotional and intellectual, of a vastly more refined society, profoundly changed by the ferment of revived romanticism; but, while they were less superficial than Fielding and Smollett, they indulged in no subtle analysis of character and aimed at no intimate psychical disclosures. The fact that the dramatic and melodramatic Dickens was the dominant personality in the world of fiction, as Scott had been before him, shows how nearly allied the novel, as written by men, was to the older forms of masterly entertainment.

So, too, when we advance another step, to a wholly new order of creative work in George Meredith's fiction, while we feel ourselves lifted into a psychical world, where the comedy of life is heightened by poetry and illuminated by philosophy, and the whole entertainment is transformed, still under these so novel conditions we note not merely the old mastery which counted for greatness in masculine achievement since art was born, but the consciously brilliant trick of it. He penetrated to the minds of his men and women as no other novelist before him had, but often his philosophy obscured rather than illuminated, proving a will-o'-the-wisp to his own imagination and to his reader's. Thomas Hardy, in

his more gigantic and naturalistic dramatic mastery, was, if more modest, quite as wilful.

We ask ourselves, then, if there can be a new art of fiction quite free from the devices which men have used with more or less of magic since they began to give creative imagination embodiment in the set forms of human speech and for the purposes of human entertainment. Is creative realism, pure and simple, possible? Can there be a representation of life which does not lift it, by dramatic or poetic tension or picturesque enhancement, out of what we deprecatingly call its commonness—a representation of life creatively embodying its inherent charm, its native beauty, humor, bounty, and pathos, in all its commonness, and needing no didactic purpose, no speculative intention, for its justification? That would indeed be creative realism, but so remote from all which we have been accustomed to call art that we must refer it to the æsthetic of a new naturalism.

Every step in the advance of fiction since the middle of the nineteenth century has been toward this new naturalism—toward the representation of life in the light of its native unfolding, just as during the same period every advance in science has been toward the disclosure, not of wonders attributable to Nature, but of those which natively belong to her and which she herself reveals to man's waiting vision. Meredith and Hardy were, in different ways, the prophets of this ultra-modern fiction, and the disciples of Meredith, or at least his natural successors in the lines of his prophecy—such men as Conrad and Hewlett and Henry James—have been masterly creators and interpreters; but the real development in this new field has been due mainly to women, because of their more intimate sense of life in its near and common aspects and in its natural becomings, and because that kind of mastery which made the old art did not come in the way of their progress toward the new naturalism. They have given us, therefore, more examples of unadulterated realism since their fresh advent into fiction—after a considerable interval—at about the same time that Meredith appeared with his whimsical bravura, *The Shaving of Shagpat*.

We need not point to the work done by Mrs. Gaskell, George Eliot, and Mrs. Oliphant, dealing directly with contemporary common life within closely parochial limits, or show how natively real it was as compared with the examples furnished by Anthony Trollope and other men portraying life within such limitations. George Eliot's fiction, so far as realism is concerned, went to pieces when she wrote *Romola*, following the masculine fashion of art. The majority of women novelists since her time have attempted the same fashion with less admirable results, having little perception of what is distinctively the office of modern fiction—the disclosure of life as it is in its own natural procedure and not as we would sentimentally or with speculative ingenuity refashion it. Perhaps a true knowledge of heredity would show that most women are not born distinctively women—that is, as having the intimate sense of things in a creative way—and are to be regarded as a social class rather than as a sex, it being indifferent what place they take either in literature or in the world's business.

It seems almost paradoxical that in our own generation, when there seems to be an increasing number of women belonging to this indifferent class, there are more genuine examples of creative realism in women's fiction than ever before. This realism, in its simplest terms, has been exemplified chiefly in short stories, because the elaboration of the novel usually leads to the adoption of the old contrivances necessary to a "plot." These stories have shown what a range of variations is possible in the reaction of the creative imagination upon the common material of every-day life. The creations of Miss Wilkins, Miss Jewett, Mrs. Deland, Edith Wharton, Mary Austin, and Georg Schock stand out vividly in the American field; there are fewer in the English, but the work of Mrs. Dudeney most instantly recurs to our mind. If in some of these women's stories it is the native quality which impresses us, we feel that is born of life; and if in those of others it is a dramatic or poetic tension which heightens the charm for us, we feel that it is life's own tension. We are removed as far as possible from the old story-teller's art.

Editor's Drawer

Beverly's Benevolent Hairpin Reclamation Society

BY THOMAS A. JANVIER

ALL that you have urged, Bishop, in regard to infusing practicality into philanthropy," said the Colonel, "would have been listened to with a warm interest by my friend Mr. Beverly."

"Unless Beverly 'd gone to sleep at the Bishop's 'fourthly,' same as I did," put in the Doctor, stretching himself and yawning.

"Practicality," continued the Colonel, ignoring the Doctor's interpellation, "was Mr. Beverly's dominant characteristic. Just as it was the essence of his many curious and useful mechanical inventions, so was it the essence of his many humane projects for the amelioration of the condition of his fellow men. His Benevolent Hairpin Reclamation Society, for instance—"

"Pardon me, my dear Colonel," interrupted the Bishop. "Before we go farther I must beg that you will favor us with at least a partial explanation of the eccentric, I may even say the incongruous, name of Mr. Beverly's society. Frankly, I do not see how a hairpin can be benevolent. True," continued the Bishop, musingly, "we still find—lingering in obscure nooks and corners of the world—survivals of the medieval custom of endowing inanimate objects with vital characteristics. Equally, a like disposition is found everywhere among children. A child, for example, will assail with angry objurgation the knife with which it has cut its own fingers; precisely as though—"

"You needn't snip down that medieval survival to only children, Bish," interposed the Doctor. "I guess it's in the bed-rock of the race. You just ought to have heard me swearing away last night at a chair I banged into in the dark!"

"I am very well pleased, sir," replied the Bishop, stiffly, "that I was not in a position to overhear those regrettable

lapses of speech on your part, which could not but have been most offensive to one of my cloth. I will admit, however, that your unhappy outburst of profanity, directed at an inanimate object, does illustrate the curious ethnological reversionary trait now under discussion."

"I beg your pardon, Bishop," said the Colonel, coldly. "I am under the impression that the matter now under discussion—at least, of elucidation—is the philanthropic project of my friend Mr. Beverly. I even venture to remind you that your request for an explanation of the name given by Mr.



"USEFUL EMPLOYMENT WAS PROVIDED FOR A NEGLECTED CLASS OF INDIGENTS"