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NOVEL OR ROMANCE: PROBLEMS OF GENRE IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH PROSE FICTION

Jessie Kocmanová

The climate of reviews and criticism relating to the English novel from about the Fifties to the mid-Seventies betrays much uncertainty and indecision in theoretical approach. Some aspects of the contemporary novel have aroused alarm and perhaps despondency among reviewers and presumably, too, the reading public: the reader is at a loss to know what the novelist intends to do, and begins even to doubt if this is known to the novelist himself, or if he has succeeded in doing it. I believe that this uncertainty and critical embarrassment arise partly from our not acknowledging sufficiently clearly that the novel is only one kind of valid prose fiction, and that the romance (and not only in the widely popular forms of Science and Fantasy Fiction) is still very much alive. Science and Fantasy Fiction, on all their levels from the creatively valid to mass-produced pulp, make frank recognition of their romantic mode, however much they call upon an outwardly realistic semblance. The significance of romance as an existing genre was well defined by Northrop Frye as early as 1957.¹ But many contemporary writers, faced with both creative and philosophical problems too difficult to solve, blend a realistic method with elements of the romantic genre — and that in the extreme form of the “Gothic” romance — apparently in the hope of solving creative difficulties. This causes confusion not only in the reader but also in the creative writer himself.

One of the strangest features of the “Gothic” novel is its frequent clumsiness, its intrusion of the ludicrous, which alienates the modern reader (I am thinking, for example, of the magic helmet in *The Castle of Otranto*). This results from disregard or rather ignorance of the principle of “keeping” or appropriateness, essential to the true medieval romance. One of the most gifted contemporary writers, Iris Murdoch, has been associated with the revived term “Gothic”. It is clear from her own critical statements as well as from remarks in interviews² that she is

¹ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, N. J., 1957, discussion throughout, and Glossary, 367.

² Radio interview with Ronald Brydon, “Talking to Iris Murdoch”, *The Listener*, April 1968, 433–4.

seriously concerned with presenting a valid picture of society, but finds it difficult: "I suppose one of the reasons why novelists are more uneasy nowadays is that society is much more problematic — it's harder to place your people confidently in society. What we tend to do [...] is to take a kind of section or level through society, and produce an illusion of people living in a complete society, whereas in Tolstoy or Jane Austen they really are doing so. Their characters have got a complete society around them whereas with my characters there's a kind of illusion involved, a deliberate piece of art illusion, in making it seem that they live in a society which isn't really given in the book. But I think this is a fault."

The elements of incompletely assimilated "reality" which cause violation of the "art illusion" and produce the "Gothic" and often ludicrous effects are well summed-up in a pseudo-review of an imaginary novel by Iris Murdoch, devised by Katherine Whitehorn, the Women's Page columnist of the *Observer*.³

The Clanger by Iris Murdoch

"The heroine, inhibited by memories of her step-father's attempted rape on her at the age of seven, marries an artist who paints posters for blue movies but who turns out to be a drug addict. But the artist's illegitimate sister is having an affair with her butler. On reaching his strange house in the West Country the heroine immediately falls in love with the south half of a pair of Siamese twins living in a summerhouse in the garden quaintly called *The Androgine*. But by now the sister is having an affair with the gardener. The husband cures himself of drugs, but the heroine has now transferred her affections to the other Siamese twin. However, the sister is now having an affair with the chauffeur. Although all now seems set for a happy ending, complication arises when the husband contracts a homosexual relationship with the [first Siamese twin...] This is a novel which must have an immediate and personal impact on all who appreciate the problems of modern society."

Parody, of course, not only arouses laughter by mocking its object, but also helps us to recognize the object for what it is. More than one of Iris Murdoch's novels could be plot-summarized in this way. We may note how remarkably well such a summary fits the description of 18th-century romance provided by *Pamela*: "the marvellous and improbable", "so unnaturally inflaming passion, and so full of love and intrigue, that most of them seemed calculated to fire the imagination, rather than to inform the judgement..." "engaging with monsters, rambling in search of adventures, making unnatural difficulties..." The heroine is "taught to consider her father's house as an enchanted castle, and her lover as the hero who is to dissolve the charm, and to set her at liberty from one confinement, in order to put her into another". "The voice of reason" is "drowned in that of indiscreet love".⁴ True parody must not depart too far from the truth

³ The cutting of this review, published in 1969, was sent by a friend, and I have not so far been able to ascertain the exact date of publication.

⁴ Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, II, letter cii, quoted Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel*, Lond., 1968, 49. For ready reference to some of the most pertinent remarks

of the work parodied, and most reviewers and readers of Iris Murdoch have felt in a way they may not be prepared to define, that her books do "have an immediate and personal impact on all who appreciate the problems of modern society".⁵

In other words, if we take parody as a category which amuses and instructs by exaggerating to absurdity the actual qualities of a work of art, then Murdoch's novels, it is suggested by Katherine Whitehorn's "review", contain features which are similar to those recognized in romance. I hope to show that by not recognizing the just claims of romance as a relevant form and thus intermingling romance elements inappropriately with a realistic depiction, even the novelist himself is driven to treat wrongly the source of his inspiration and to distort his treatment to fit some exterior conception of what a novel should be. By intruding elements of the romance genre into what appears to be a realistic novel, the writer may also seek to conceal (above all from himself) inadequacies in his own philosophy and view of society.

Let us consider for a moment some at least of the definitions of Romance as opposed to Novel. Frye's presentation of Aristotle's theory of modes based on the "elevation" of the characters is one of the most helpful modern formulations. The hero of romance is in the second category, immediately after the divine hero of myth: he is a man, but "moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural in us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established".⁶ Walter Scott would have agreed with this, defining a Romance, in his "Essay on Romance", as a "fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents", whereas the Novel differs from the Romance "because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society".⁷ Even more striking in its antithesis is the definition of Clare Reeve, in "The Progress of Romance" (1785): "The Romance is a heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things — The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written."⁸

Now we may ask, but what are writers in this day and age thinking of, to drag us centuries back and confuse our minds by introducing the equivalents of marvels, ogres and supernatural happenings? What is going to happen to realism, to the presentation of social reality, to a committed interpretation of society? A suggested answer comes from Nathaniel Hawthorne, who claimed in the Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*

on their art I am much indebted to this brilliantly arranged selection of quotations from practising novelists.

⁵ Whitehorn, cf. n. 3.

⁶ Frye, 33.

⁷ Quoted Allott, 49.

⁸ Quoted Allott, 47.

a certain latitude for the writer who calls his work a Romance.⁹ He sets out not, as in the Novel, to "aim at a very minute fidelity . . . to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience", but to present "the truth of the human heart", "under circumstances, to a great extent of the writer's own choosing or creation". The writer sees his own purpose, says Hawthorne, "in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us. It is a legend prolonging itself, from an epoch now gray in the distance, down to our own broad daylight". This is a definition, or rather a defence, which will prove useful in considering some novels of our time, and some of the novelist's problems. It also finds a remarkable echo in what Elizabeth Bowen remarked in the course of a broadcast talk in 1956 on "Truth and Fiction".¹⁰ "What is the actuality of a novel written this year or last year, or a few years ago, which holds us? Is it perhaps a comprehension and realization of our time? Is it that — because of the stress of history and the extending consciousness we have of being people in a time — we are more time-conscious, we are more aware of the particular climate of our day? [...] And when I speak of a novel being truly contemporary I do not mean the purely topical, which bases itself on the events and happenings of one year. We want our time to live in art and in the comprehension of other people, as the times before lived for us." It may well be the search for an interpretation, for the "legend prolonging itself", that leads some contemporary novelists to resort to ill-assimilated elements of the romance. What casts most doubt on the soundness of this method is the perplexity they leave in the reader as to their purpose.

Critics themselves have often been scathingly criticized for telling the creative artist what he ought to have done, where he went wrong, and so forth. Yet there is in fact much in the development of the novel which suggests that distortion and non-realization of the writer's intention by himself have played a large part in producing the body of prose fiction which we have. Scott's *Saint Ronan's Well* is a case in point. I make no apology for returning to Scott, because the creative and critical difficulties of the novel today go at least as far back, in fact they were written into the novel as a genre by the practice of the great master himself.

Scott wrote *Saint Ronan's Well* almost at the end of his effective writing career (1823). Almost all his great novels had already been written. The only subsequent novel to reach his highest creative level was *Redgauntlet*, published in the next year, 1824. After that, from 1826, Scott's own misfortunes came thick and fast, accompanied by a progressive breakdown in health, creative elan, and power of concentration. So *Saint Ronan's Well* was composed at a rather critical moment, and was itself a deliberate if not fully conscious experiment. Scott has left us plenty of evidence that he was much occupied with the question of what the public would accept — although he saw this, or at least wrote of it, as if it were merely a bread-and-butter question of what would please the reading public. However it was certainly also a creative question, above all of finding

⁹ Quoted Allott, 51.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Bowen, "Truth and Fiction", broadcast talk, 1956.

the theme which would arouse his creative energy. He was an admirer of the "domestic novel" of his day, especially of the women novelists, and in his Introduction to *SRW* tells us by way of apology that it is with a "sense of temerity" that he has "intruded upon a species of composition which had been of late practiced with such distinguished success". He admits that his "new attempt" is "out of his ordinary style". Yet, whatever Scott intended, as a bid to capture the public, *SRW* is not in essence a "domestic novel" or a "novel of manners". His delineation of the manners of the Well is harsher than that of Jane Austen, reminding us rather of Thackeray, while other sections of the book bring us in theme and treatment close to the novel as practised both by Charlotte and by Emily Brontë.

While Scott supposed that he was writing a "little drama of modern life" based on the "shifting manners of our time" (Introduction, *SRW*, p. viii and vi), the decisive words are "drama" and "shifting". As in the historical novels, so too, in his one attempt at delineating the life of his own time, Scott seizes immediately on the contrasting forces which are shaping the changes in society, and, at the very outset, places the decaying economy and society of old feudal Scotland in opposition to the new, smart, essentially bourgeois society — whatever its pretensions to aristocratic fashion — of the Well. The economic and social decay of the Mowbrays is not only the precondition of the contrast between the Well on the one hand, and the old village, inn and mansion on the other, but also the pre-condition of Clara's ruin. Now the character of Clara lies at the heart of the question of why *SRW* has turned out to be the book it is. We may recall that 7 or 8 years before the story commences, two half brothers, one of them the legal Earl of Etherington, had appeared in Saint Ronan's and become involved with Clara. In obscure circumstances, both had fled the country; in equally obscure circumstances, Clara undergoes what would today be called a nervous breakdown. She becomes strange and wilful in her dress and behaviour. Her brother, the penniless and gambling laird of the manor, knows that he has not performed his duty towards her. Clara is deliberately presented as a strange, unaccountable heroine, not perhaps far from the sisterhood of Meg Merrilees and Helen Macgregor. She persistently wears her riding-habit, even in society, as a protest against the false elegance of the ultra-fashionable ladies of the Well, whom she despises. She is, in fact, a drop-out. Yet as sister to the local lord, she is tolerated by the snobbish dwellers at the Well, who call her the Dark Ladye. Scott himself likens her to Ophelia.

The whole plot turns on an elaborate intrigue and exchange of identity between the two half-brothers, explained in a very contrived way by means of letters — all this being very conventionally "romantic" and dull. But the reverse of dull is the presentation of Clara and her relationship with her brother, who feels alternately towards her annoyance and anger, and then again affection and guilt, almost like an Iris Murdoch character. It is he who utters the words which must belong to Scott's original conception of the tale: "You roamed the woods a little too much in my father's time, if all stories be true." (Ch. XIII). The point I am making is that according to Scott's original conception of the tale, Clara had been com-

promised and possibly become pregnant by her lover, the true though unrecognized heir to the earldom, in a situation which, according to Scots law, might have amounted to marriage by declaration, and this was so shocking to Ballantyne, who read Scott's manuscripts as they were written, that Scott was induced to weaken and obscure this part of the tale. There seem to be still embedded in the novel hints as to the existence of a lost heir, a missing infant, but Scott, to satisfy the prudery which would not allow a young lady of good family to be in such a situation, had to rhetoricize the madness of Clara, make it seem an Ophelia-like excess of sensibility, a purely nervous state resulting from the cruel deception by the false heir which had led to an apparently legal marriage to the wrong man. The character of Clara is thus an extraordinary compound of a colourless and helpless "romantic" heroine with a pre-Brontë variety of the independent heroine — who quotes Burns in defence of poverty and declares, when she rejects the titular earl on his appearance at the Well eight years later: "I am determined to eat bread of my own buying — I can do twenty things, and I am sure some one or other of them will bring me all the little money I will need." The plot hinges on the impersonation of the true earl by the false at a secret marriage ceremony, and it seems incredible that neither the true earl, by this time an experienced and widely travelled man of at least twenty-six, nor Clara, by now twenty-four, a girl of some learning and independent outlook, should have realized that such a forced and deceptive marriage was in fact not legal — particularly when it had not been consummated.

The entire action surrounding this "intrigue" — in the sense of plot — is exaggeratedly melodramatic and "Gothic". The situation in terms of human suffering would be tragic enough, but it would seem that Scott, disturbed in the development of the tale along the lines he had seen it with his sober sense of reality, had felt himself obliged to clothe it in the utmost "Gothic" confusion he could attain. We thus have at least three genres conflicting within the work: the novel of manners, combined with the presentation of a solid social scene involving the usual Scottian contrast of past and present, the "Gothic" romance of incredible intrigue, and the tragic psychological and realistic novel of the conflict of character. There is in fact an embryonic fourth genre, that of the detective tale, for the eccentric Touchwood — in fact the long-lost cousin who acts, but too late, as *deus ex machina* — at times plays something of the role of all-knowing detective, although at the same time it is love of intrigue and superior knowledge of the facts of the situation that help on the catastrophe. Edgar Johnson has pointed out the likelihood that *SRW* provided Dickens with inspiration for *Bleak House*.¹¹ I am not entirely prepared to assert direct conscious influence of this novel on later writers, because I am inclined to think that too few people actually read *SRW* or if they do, realize what it is they have read. Many critics have completely ignored it, and Scott himself continued to regard it as a novel of manners, never repeating the experiment. Yet it seems that what he was really doing, or set out to do, in treating a completely contemporary theme, was to ap-

¹¹ Edgar Johnson, *Sir Walter Scott, The Great Unknown*, 1970, 916–920.

proach seriously a contemporary heroine from the psychological aspect. Obligated by conventional scruples to compromise with the truth of the situation as he originally saw it, he resorted to "Gothic" developments and situations.

I have ventured to describe this work at some length because it appears to be the prototype of many novels of today, where creative difficulties, perhaps difficulties in realizing or in acknowledging the actual social situation, lead writers to seek a creative solution in the methods and even conventions of romance, and of the distorted, "Gothic" romance at that.

The history of the novel after the mid-19th century is largely the history of the novelist's increasing consciousness of what he is doing — and sometimes even self-consciousness to the point of embarrassment for himself and the reader. The novel was an expanding form, and the serious novelists felt the challenge and increasingly believed it was a boundless form, that it was for the novelist himself, and not the publisher or the reading public, to say what the novel should be. This led to increasing theorizing on the part of the novelists as to what they were trying to write and perhaps inevitably to the novel about the novelist writing a novel. By now, this has become one of the most boring and question-begging themes or frames for the novel — I would instance Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook*, to which I will return later. But at the very outset of the career of the modern experimental novel, George Gissing wrote a book about novelists and their ways of working, *New Grub Street* (1891), which is still one of the best and most readable books about writers, in spite of the gleams of late-Victorian sentimentality. Gissing's method is one of straightforward narrative realism — what happened, whom it happened to, where it happened, what happened next — but he also tells us successfully what it was like for the people it happened to. However, writers with a larger experience than Gissing, less limited by awe for the English lower-middle-class convention of gentility and less tortured by an ambivalent attitude towards the proletariat, writers such as James and Conrad, knew that the whole conception of reality, including the human consciousness and subconscious, is much more complicated than it appeared to Gissing, and sought for ways to reveal it. My purpose here is not to deal with the development of the novel in the hands of James, of Joyce, and of Virginia Woolf, because in my opinion their greatest contribution to the technique and method of the novel lies in their explorations of the method of revelation of reality, of real definable experience. This is not to say that elements of "romance" in the sense I am using it here are not to be found, for example, in James, as of course he realized himself. For the purposes of romance, in James's opinion, the "necromancer" cuts the cable which ties the balloon of experience to the earth, but must do so "insidiously [...] without our detecting him",¹² the general attribute of romance being that it is "experience liberated". "The extraordinary is most extraordinary in that it happens to you and me."¹³ In other words, even "romance" must

¹² Henry James, Preface to *The American*, New York ed., 1907–1917, Vol. II, quoted Allott, 56.

¹³ James, l. c. and Preface to "The Altar of the Dead", N. Y. ed., quoted Allott, 57.

have its valid relationship to reality, must be in "keeping". What happens in Virginia Woolf happens, we might say, between the acts of a very real and very typical social pageant. The streets of Joyce's Dublin are very real streets. None of these writers can be said exactly to have shown the way to later writers — rather they may be said to have opened up a boundless unmapped continent, in which novelists ever since have been wandering and frequently leaving their bones in the desert.

The question which appears to be central to the further development of the contemporary novel in England is that of whether the writer is going to stick to the realistic narrative of the Victorian tradition, with its strong infusion of social criticism, or is going to experiment deliberately in eccentric form and incidentally all too frequently render the social criticism less clear-cut, if not completely obscure or even non-existent. The need for experiment was already felt strongly by Aldous Huxley, whose *Point Counter Point* (1928) is the classic instance of the novel which seems to query all values in the search for a valid aesthetic interpretation of experience. So far as he tries to incorporate the experience of the novelist writing his novel, he is much less convincing than Gissing. The various fictitious writers whom he depicts here — even if they are based perhaps on real writers such as Lawrence, or himself — are very little differentiated and their characterization as writers is dim. The most convincing is Philip Quarles, at least partly autobiographical, though by no means such a complex character as Huxley himself. It is Philip who is perplexed by problems not only of creative method but also by those of selecting material. Searching for "a new way of looking at things" that "I want to experiment with" (Ch. XIV), he decides that the essence of new way of looking is multiplicity. "Multiplicity of eyes and multiplicity of aspects seen... The biologist, the chemist, the physicist, the historian. Each sees, professionally, a different aspect of the event, a different layer of reality. What I want to do is to look with all those eyes at once." This is what Huxley endeavours to do in *PCP*. It would result, thinks Quarles, in "a very queer¹⁴ picture indeed". "Rather too queer", I should have thought," rejoins his wife. "But it can't be too queer", said Philip. "However queer the picture is, it can never be half so odd as the original reality [...] That's what I want to get in this book — the astonishingness of the most obvious things. Really any plot or situation would do. Because everything's implicit in anything. The whole book could be written about a walk from Picadilly Circus to Charing Cross." His wife, after a long silence, says "All the same [...] I wish one day you'd write a simple straightforward story about a young man and a young woman who fall in love and get married and have difficulties, but get over them, and finally settle down," "Or why not a detective novel?" He laughed. But if, he reflected, he didn't write that sort of story, perhaps it was because he couldn't. In art there are simplicities more difficult than the most serried complications. He could manage the complications as well as anyone. But when it came to the simplicities, he lacked the talent — that talent which is of the heart, no less than of the head, of the feelings,

¹⁴ "Queer" of course in the sense of "odd" current in the Twenties and Thirties.

the sympathies, the intuitions, no less than of the analytical understanding." (PCP, p. 197¹⁵).

It is Huxley himself who shows his inability, in *PCP*, to manage the simplicities. The complexities of this novel give us a less reliable picture of upper-class English "intellectual" life in the Thirties than many a good detective novel with a sound delineation of social background. They certainly convey less of the sinister infiltration of Fascism than for example an early Graham Greene such as *It's A Battlefield* (1934). Huxley's observation is at fault as well as his interpretation.

What Huxley/Quarles foresees is much of the future development of the English novel. The extracts from Quarles' notebook are frequently naive and unnecessary, simply uninteresting. But Huxley is definitely prophetic in the passage where Philip Quarles, the novelist inside a novelist's novel, muses as follows: "Put a novelist into the novel. He justifies aesthetic generalizations, which may be interesting — at least to me. He also justifies experiment. Specimens of his work may illustrate other possible or impossible ways of telling a story. And if you have him telling parts of the same story as you are, you can make a variation on the theme. But why draw the line at one novelist inside your novel? Why not a second inside his? And a third inside the novel of the second? And so on to infinity, like those advertisements of Quaker Oats where there's a quaker holding a box of oats, on which is a picture of another quaker holding another box of oats, on which, etc., etc. At about the tenth remove you might have a novelist telling your story in algebraic symbols or in terms of variations in blood-pressure, pulse, secretion of ductless glands and reaction times. (Ch. 22, p. 298). This in fact is more or less what happened in the work of Doris Lessing. In *The Golden Notebook* (1962) we have, instead of the usual Lessing woman at the centre, two complementary Lessing women as the main characters, complicated by the further two Lessing women who are the main characters in the novel which one of the first two is dealing with, the effect is stultifying. It becomes increasingly difficult to remember which is which. Lessing's later novel *Briefing for a Descent Into Hell* (1971) which apparently takes part inside the mind of an unconscious immobilized patient, almost reaches the point imagined by Huxley of telling the story in terms of variations in blood-pressure, etc. Lack of communication seems to have reached its height.

An interesting point is made by Iris Murdoch in the above-quoted interview with Ronald Bryden. The reviewer writes: "I was surprised that she should prefer realism. I had assumed, I said, that the great 19th-century novel of society was a worked-out form, and that she was exploring new territory for fiction, much of it what would once have been called the supernatural; that what baffled many people about her characters was that they were motivated by the passions and images which clouded their consciousness, rather than money or social relationships. 'I don't myself feel one should necessarily aim at experiment [...] I still feel myself that that élan of the great 19th-century novel isn't spent, that there's plenty of room for people to go on trying to write like Tolstoy or

¹⁵ Quotations are from the Penguin edition of *PCP*.

Dickens or Jane Austen, just doing it in the modern idiom without any question of novelty coming in at all.'"¹⁶ The fact remains that Iris Murdoch for her part has elected not to do this. Nevertheless by no means all the serious novelists of today or of just yesterday depart from the method and themes of the 19th-century realist tradition. I consider that the central novelist in this tradition, still writing today, is C. P. Snow.

There has been considerable critical denigration of Snow, based on the conception that he is not a serious novelist,¹⁷ that he has merely presented the outer, factual semblances of events which in his own personal career he closely experienced. This is partly due to Snow's own methodical approach of presenting his material by way of a *persona* which can be closely identified with Snow's own character and professional experience. Lewis Eliot, it is true, is not a physicist like Snow himself, but a barrister, and thus in a similar way not quite part of the Civil Service Establishment which is the basis of his novelistic material. The sequence of the novels follows closely the sequence of actual events, not very much disguised, and the Lewis Eliot *persona*, with its not complete commitment to a Civil Service career, has been seized upon to suggest that the novels exist as an outlet for a careerist manqué, a disappointed man, who whether as scientist or civil servant didn't quite make it to the front rank and compensated by writing novels, which, it is alleged, are not novels but merely dullish transcriptions from life. This misconception, which arises from Snow's honesty and directness of presentation, reminds one of the miscomprehension of Trollope which owed much to the honesty of his *Autobiography*. But the facts of Snow's Civil Service career, which could equally be regarded as supremely successful, are just as irrelevant to the artistry of his novels as was the modest fortune Trollope made with his industrious writing. In relation to his creative work, the point of his career is that it has given Snow a certain knowledge, a certain authority, a certain slice of life which he is eminently qualified to serve to us. What must interest us is the success with which he does just this. Compared with other novel series of the time (Powell, Waugh), Snow's series can now be seen as supremely successful art, embarked upon with a clear sense of artistic purpose and carried through with increasing artistic mastery and determination. Especially with his concluding novels Snow has demonstrated the advantage for the novelist of firm terms of reference and a closely realistic relation to a section of life. What is exceptional, and what is of immediate relevance to the artistic significance of the work, is the aesthetic purpose, which Snow himself has described in terms which let us see how he succeeded in preserving his "vision" over a period of more than forty years from inception to completion of the work. On January 1st, 1935, he tells us, "Suddenly I saw, or felt, or experienced, or whatever you like to call it, both the outline of the entire Strangers and Brothers sequence and its inner organization. that is, the response or dialectic between Lewis Eliot as observer and as the

¹⁶ "Talking to Iris Murdoch", *Listener*, April 1968, 433-434.

¹⁷ This is very much the attitude taken up, for example, by Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel*, London, 1971.

form of direct experience. As soon as this happened, I felt extraordinarily happy. I got the whole conception, I think, so far as that means anything, in a few minutes."¹⁸

Snow's conception of the involved but objective observer, the contradictions between his observation and his evaluation, conditioned by his own experience and emotions, is both more profound and less fantastic than the rather pretentious unifying motif of Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time*, or Waugh's deliberate selection of Guy Crouchback, a central hero with an off-centre problem. The themal motifs of the two latter series do in fact render less objective the picture of society. Both Powell and Waugh — powerful though their control of illusion is — deal with an incomplete section of society, presenting their "art illusion", to use the words of Iris Murdoch, acted out as it were in the wings of the Establishment rather than on the full centre stage of Snow, each conception strongly marked by the personal and eccentric sympathies of the author.

We may of course legitimately object to certain assumptions of Snow about the central importance of what he describes, or even to the way he interprets it. We may not like the Lewis Eliot milieu, any more than we like the milieu of Archdeacon Grantly of Barchester, but that does not absolve us from the task of judging this sequence as a unique and sensitive rendering, in realistic terms, of certain important aspects of English life over the last forty years or so — something which no-one has done with the force and conviction and breadth of Snow. It is only too easy to make fun of Snow — after all, what he is taking so seriously is perhaps, in its way, a pack of cards. But again, perhaps, parody will help us to see the true qualities of the work parodied.

The funniest parody or take-off of Snow has been written by William Cooper, who is also his serious biographer and critic, and the parody is dedicated to Snow's wife, Pamela Hansford Johnson. Cooper's book, *Memoirs of a New Man* (1966) is described as a novel — but of course it is not — it is sheer pastiche of Snow at his most authoritative. Not only does it parody Snow's critical governmental situations, it also parodies his dead-pan, Civil Service official reportage of the situation, his search for creative method, his preoccupation with the movements of time. One of the chapters begins: "The events I've been describing so far happened in January 1962, and it's now the middle of 1963: I discover that it's not at all easy to write about the present — and there are plenty of reasons for thinking it's not wise either. [New paragraph] One of the difficulties in writing about the here-and-now is getting over the thought of how dated the book will seem in the there-and-then, where 'then' is a decade hence. Nothing dates like the present." This I take as Cooper's acknowledgement of the fact that Snow, in trying to write realistically about the present as it moves ahead, is really sticking out his neck for the critics to belabour. In reality, of course, Snow has serenely continued to present the official scene and perhaps more importantly to return in his last books of the sequence to some of the least pleasant facets of the provincial life he has left behind so long ago (*The Sleep of Reason*, 1968)

¹⁸ Quoted by Jeremy Thale, *C. P. Snow, Writers and Critics* series, 1964.

as well as to present some of the problems of current student politics (*Last Things*, 1970).

What is particularly illuminating about Cooper's parody is that it does point up the achievements of Snow. He seizes upon all his mannerisms, including the up-to-the moment command of Establishment In-vocabulary. What of course Cooper cannot put into his books is Snow's leisurely and mature observation of humanity, his unobtrusive love for people, and his determination to express his knowledge with the least amount of fuss. Not even Joyce Cary succeeded in presenting a coherent picture of English life with such solidity and conviction. Snow, then, is the continuer of the solid realistic tradition of the English novel. But that does not mean that his tradition is the only possible one, or that, in lesser hands, it is even effective.

William Plomer has suggested why this may be: "Jejune writers about 'the novel' have not understood clearly enough how often in the inter-war years a novel was the form in which it was most convenient for young men and women to express and record their consciousness of finding themselves in a world of changing values. It gave them a chance to challenge or flout or protest against what seemed to them stale or sterile, and to advance their own ideas of emancipation, progress, right-mindedness or leftwingedness. So far as the vast output of first novels in that period is concerned, it is probably true to say what while very few are of enduring literary value a good many are of some sociological interest."¹⁹ There is considerable evidence that even later retrospective novels dealing with this period, however well-meaning, however committed, fail artistically when they cling to a simplistic method of exposition, when they lack the creative inspiration for shaping their material in such a way as to give a pattern or structure to the remembered experience they deal with, and do not have the intellectual toughness to present convincingly their evaluation of events. I am thinking of novels which in milieu and apparent method are not far removed from Snow, such as Edward Upward's *In the Thirties* (1900) and Pamela Hansford Johnson's *The Survival of the Fittest* (1968). The autobiographical interest of these books is considerable, but there is little in them to justify the form of the novel.

With this short discussion of the straight realistic novel I have hoped to show that it is by no means a lost cause. On the other hand, it is not the only way of seeking to represent reality in prose fiction, and in lesser hands it can be hopelessly dull. A direct realistic method of presentation demands today not only extreme sensitivity of manner — which to my mind is to be found in Snow — but also a very firm grip of reality itself and a well-formulated philosophy of life, gifts with which Snow is also endowed but which are a less common attribute of most creative writers of fiction. Very often the ability to see clearly and to present vividly applies, in the case of the contemporary writer, to only a small part of life, often only of individual, not social life. This does not of course mean that such a picture of life may not be of profound value; but for the

¹⁹ William Plomer, *At Home*, Cape, 1958, Penguin 1961, 95.

picture to be both artistically and realistically valid the writer must always be aware both of what he is saying and of how he is saying it.

Four outstanding women writers, Elizabeth Bowen, Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, and Muriel Spark, all have the gift of sensitive perception and the power to re-create exceptional experience. Each of them seems to have acquired with the passage of time a more and more ambiguous attitude to experience, and an increasing necessity to resolve the particular experience transmitted in a particular novel by the intrusion of arbitrary violence. Of course, we live in a violent age. There is unnecessary suffering and violence all over the world, much of it resulting from the contingencies of human life rather than from the innate malevolence of mankind. So why should a novelist of sensibility not write about it? We do not complain about the death of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. Indeed we have anticipated it from the first tap of the ghost fingers on the window pane. But these sensitive writers mentioned seem to invite or urge us to participate in suffering and violence which even in the context of the hazards of contemporary life often seem excessive, avoidable, arbitrary, and above all unprepared for artistically. The apparently unmotivated way in which violence comes smashing in on the Edwardian calm of E. M. Forster's gentlemanly and ladylike characters is prophetic of the artistic use made of violence by the writers now considered. But it is a violence with a difference — in Forster it would seem to be a test which demonstrates the validity and solidity of the scene and characters he has drawn; and they are for the most part clear and human enough to stand up to this test. But in the younger writers the violence would seem only too often to remove the characters and situations to a dimension of unreality.

Iris Murdoch, as we have seen in the earlier-quoted interview, has admitted her difficulties in creating a solid and convincing picture of society in her novels. It is also symptomatic that, like the later Elizabeth Bowen and like Doris Lessing and Muriel Spark in different ways, she apparently feels herself confronted with what she calls the supernatural — “in an age such as ours, where the world of religion and God and gods has become completely problematic, there are more psychological forces working loose, as it were, as if they were demons or spirits”.²⁰ These “forces” tend to manifest themselves in extreme and unexpected and uncouth violence.

It is however necessary to see this intrusion of violence not only as one way of expressing dismay at the incomprehensibility of fate, a kind of metaphysical or transcendental use of violence, but that it is at the same time frequently a deliberate device of rhetoric, “metaphysical” in the Donneian sense. It is as if the writer were saying: “Ah, you think you're reading a realistic novel, do you; everything weighed, measured, balanced and accounted for. Well — bang! — you're not. Things are not what they seem. We're back in the Castle of Otranto after all. And your guess about what it all means is as good as mine.”

The fact that these writers now considered have something in common

²⁰ “Talking to Iris Murdoch”, *The Listener*, April 1968, 433—434.

in the manner they solve their creative difficulties is even more interesting when we consider differences not only in background and experience but even in generation. Bowen and Murdoch both have Irish affiliations, but Elizabeth Bowen was born in 1899, and her earlier novels — for example *The Last September* (1929), or even *The Death of the Heart* (1938) — apart from their sensitivity of observation and of rendering — do not anticipate the novels which have followed *The Heat of the Day* (1949) — i.e. *A World of Love* (1955), *The Little Girls* (1964) and the extraordinary *Eva Trout* (1969). She herself has said that — with the exception of *The Last September*, which is set back in the days of the Irish Civil War — “I wanted readers to contemplate what could appear to be the immediate moment — so much so, that to give the sense of the ‘now’ has been, for me, one imperative of writing.”²² What seems remarkable is the way in which her contemplation of the immediate moment has, in the novels written after World War II, become assimilated to the creative procedure of younger writers.

It is not perhaps strange that the atmosphere of Bowen’s *A World of Love* and Iris Murdoch’s *The Unicorn* (1963) should be so similar, some of the characters one might think being almost interchangeable. Although more than a generation apart, both Elizabeth Bowen and Iris Murdoch come from Ireland. The atmosphere of the Southern Irish countryside, the perfect background for “Gothic” romance, has not changed all that much in sixty years or so. One of the illustrations to Elizabeth Bowen’s study of her family’s Irish mansion, *Bowen’s Court* (1942), shows us Iris Murdoch seated with her hostess at dinner round the shining mahogany table, the whole company in formal evening dress, the quintessence of Ascendancy gentility. Iris Murdoch in *The Red and the Green* has written as it were her version of *The Last September*. Both are retrospective novels, the first written almost ten years after the events (1920–1929), the second almost fifty (1916–1965). Yet *The Last September*, which Bowen says is “of all my books, the nearest my heart”²² is not immediately autobiographical. We are told that “Elizabeth Bowen, though the first of the Irish Bowens to live in England as a child, was so removed from the native Irish culture that she first heard of the Irish Rebellion when she was at school in England in 1916.”²³ Iris Murdoch is even further removed from the world she writes about in *The Red and the Green*.

This novel is more apparently substantial, less lyrical than *The Last September*, fuller of concrete detail of the day to day life of her persons. Yet it is scarcely a “historical novel” about the Irish Rebellion — for one thing, her vaguely Ascendancy world is very much on the fringe of what was really happening, just as Bowen’s Big House in *The Last September* is on the fringe. Yet the experience which Bowen is transmitting is something which she had absorbed intimately by association, while Iris Murdoch is writing about something she herself has not lived through

²¹ Elizabeth Bowen, *Collected Impressions*, London, 1950.

²² *Collected Impressions*, 96.

²³ William Heath, *Elizabeth Bowen: An Introduction to her Novels*, Madison, 1961,

and only partially feels. The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of *The Red and the Green* suggested that the book was not of a piece. "For much of the time *The Red and the Green* is a highly acceptable and serious novel about real people in an interesting context. But it contains ridiculous elements which go a good way towards ruining it."²⁴ Yet the ridiculous, or rather perhaps the blackly absurd, is an essential element as in all Murdoch's books. It can be no accident that both Bowen and Murdoch have mentioned their indebtedness to Sheridan Le Fanu, and this supports the conclusion that the work of both writers has strong affinities with romance. "If anyone has influenced me" said Elizabeth Bowen in 1969, after the publication of *Eva Trout*, "it's probably Sheridan Le Fanu, whom I admire tremendously. My novels aren't uncanny like his but I recognize the violent element."²⁵

In spite of her disclaimer, the "uncanny" — some element which cannot be altogether explained in terms of "ordinary" life — has always been implicit in her short stories, and explicit in her later novels, beginning with *The Heat of the Day*, *A World of Love*, and *The Little Girls* contain strange elements which may be capable of rational explanation, but in the narrative itself are presented as unrational, unexplained. In *Eva Trout* the heroine herself is so monstrous that we cannot feel with her and do not know why she has been selected. It is a monstrosity that seems to arise from a failure of critical judgment, a Gothic grotesquery like the Otranto helmet, here pervading the entire novel.

Doris Lessing presents a great critical problem. Setting out as a realistic writer of great force and purpose, she has turned in the course of a sequence of novels from realistic method to cataclysmic fantasy (*Children of Violence*, 1952–1969). The elements of "Gothic" horror and absurdity in Bowen and Murdoch may serve as rhetorical devices to stress the links of their fable with a social reality which these writers feel is too dreadful to be presented literally, while objectively they are also a means of concealing deficiency of interpretation and commitment. But the element of the unreal in the later books of Doris Lessing is a definite and deliberate rejection of the reality she had stressed in her earlier creative work. She has selected a different way of begging the questions she poses, less "Gothic" and more indebted to the "scientific" creative solution adumbrated by Huxley's Quarles. She, too, has been unable to solve her creative — and primarily, philosophical — problems within the genre of the realistic novel.

Muriel Spark interweaves supernatural and extrasensory elements into all her novels. Only in one, *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), more serious and less of an intellectual game than the others, does she reduce the apparent elements of illusion and non-reality to a basis in violent fact.

My contention here has been that lack of a clear conception of genre and the resulting creative difficulties and even dubious artistic success is related to indecision or fluctuation of purpose in the writers treated in this

²⁴ TLS, 14 Oct., 1965.

²⁵ William Foster, "Sense and Sensibility" Interview with E. Bowen, *Weekend Scotsman*, March 1, 1969.

connection, and that this kind of indecision has appeared earlier in the history of the novel, related to compromise with artistic purpose (*Saint Roman's Well*).

Later developments in the contemporary English novel, especially in the writing of Alan Sillitoe and John Fowles, the two most vital and significant younger English writers, are also related to difficulties in discovering relevant theme and form, and also bear traces of conflict between Novel and Romance. These writers, however, do not resort to "Gothic" elements and thus present a rather different critical problem.

ROMÁN NEBO ROMANCE: K NĚKTERÝM PROBLÉMŮM ŽÁNRU V SOUDOBĚ ANGLICKÉ BELETRII

Studie poukazuje na problematiku tvůrčí metody u některých současných anglických romanopisců. Poněvadž nemají dostatečně promyšleny některé otázky vztahu své tvorby ke skutečnostem dnešního života, nemohou řešit tvůrčí postupy realistického románu a vsunují do své tvorby rušivé a groteskní elementy, které připomínají „gotický“ román 18. století. (Jako příklad uvádí autorka článku Iris Murdochovou.)

Krátkým rozborem žánrových prvků v románu W. Scotta *Studna sv. Ronana* chce autorka dokázat, že podobné žánrové rozpaky nejsou nové v historii románu; i u Scotta souvisí tyto umělecké neobhajitelné „romantické“ prvky s nejasností postoje autora nebo s podvědomým potlačením původního záměru, jehož plné uplatnění by nebylo v souladu s ctihodnou morálkou doby.

Neujasněnost světového názoru romanopisců často vede k výběru tematiky, která má poukázat na tvůrčí rozpaky spisovatele-umělce samého (Gissing, Huxley, Lessingová), avšak která nemůže uspokojivě řešit otázku formy a metody románu. Jako příklad úspěšného dodržování žánrových předpokladů realistického románu uvádí autorka článku C. P. Snowa. Při menším talentu jiných spisovatelů však může být realistická metoda stejně neúspěšná jako jiná.

Dále článek porovnává některé spisovatelky (Bowenová, Murdochová, Lessingová, Sparková), které používají prvků gotického „hororu“ a absurdnosti jako retorického prostředku, jenž odvádí pozornost čtenáře (i tvůrčího umělce samotného) od nevyřešených základních filozofických a společenských otázek. Není nutno zavrhnout metodu romance, ale spisovatel musí mít jasnou koncepci o žánru, ve kterém píše.