CHAPTER V
THE REALISTIC NOVEL

I. THE TWO TRADITIONS

The discussions of the ‘new drama’ appearing in *The New Age* show that it traced its origin to Ibsen. Contemporary fiction, on the other hand, was discussed with a perplexing wealth of genealogical reference which demands some classification, even at the risk of oversimplifying. In general, two groups of writers are represented: those who looked on the novel as an art form demanding technical perfection in ‘rendering the subject’, with every detail arranged so as to enhance the effect of the whole (hereafter referred to as ‘Impressionists’);¹ and those who regarded the novel primarily as a medium for the portrayal of life in all its aspects, with a sociological emphasis and very often a social thesis as its theme (hereafter, ‘Realists’).² Both of these groups differed in one important respect from their Victorian predecessors: they eschewed sentimentality and pursued each theme to its logical conclusion,

¹ This use of the term ‘Impressionism’ as applied to literature is derived from Ford Madox Ford, *Thus to Revisit* (London, 1921), p. 138; and Arnold Bennett (cf. note 4, p. 85).
² In this sense, ‘Realism’ includes such features of Naturalism (a term best reserved for the followers of its chief exponent, Zola) as were absorbed into the English tradition. When not capitalized (as in the following discussion of Bennett’s criticism), ‘realism’ may include some of the techniques of the Impressionists.

In general, these words were not carefully distinguished by novelists themselves in their critical writings. Bennett, for example, says that Chekhov ‘seems to have achieved absolute realism’, and elsewhere that Chekhov’s ‘naturalism is positively daring’.

81
not resorting to the stroke of fortune which would result in a happy ending.

The doyen of the first group was Henry James, who traced his literary lineage to Flaubert, de Maupassant, and, above all, Turgenev, ‘the novelist’s novelist—an artistic influence extraordinarily valuable and ineradicably established’. Ford Madox Ford, Galsworthy, and Conrad shared these predilections. Using the same models, these writers held similar views on the technique of the novel, especially with regard to disinterestedness and ‘composition’. In contrast to James, Conrad, Ford, and Galsworthy, the writers who looked on the novel as a vehicle of sociological content were united not by a technical tradition, but rather by virtue of their subject matter.

G. K. Chesterton traced the growth of Realism in England to the rise of science, accompanied by the decline of religion:

Mr Wells is one of a school of sensitive artists who awoke in the aching void of a world (as he has admirably put it) ‘full of the ironical silences that follow great controversies’: Dickens was dead; dogmatic democracy was dying. Aristocrats began to ‘study’ the poor, as if they were chimpanzees;

4 Galsworthy, as we shall see, has affinities with both traditions.
and aesthetes began to write slim novels, novels which were pessimistic. . . .

The novels of Zola were largely responsible for this new trend in English fiction. In 1880 he had written,

Et c’est là ce qui constitue le roman expérimental: posséder le mécanisme des phénomènes chez l’homme, montrer les rouages des manifestations intellectuelles et sensuelles telles que la physiologie nous les expliquera, sous les influences de l’hérédité et des circonstances ambiantes. . . .

‘In our modern mythology,’ wrote May Sinclair in 1897, ‘Custom, Circumstance, and Heredity are the Three Fates that weave the web of human life.’

The relatively new sciences devoted to the study of these subjects—sociology and eugenics—attracted the attention of Realistic novelists. As Chesterton indicates, sociologists ‘studied’ the lower classes in such works as Charles Booth’s seventeen-volume Life and Labour of the London People (1892-1903). Eugenics, which at that time had not been chastened by the rigorous application of scientific methods, gave writers new explanations of human psychology. While Galton was asserting that mental illness was inherited, Hardy and Gissing were attributing mental disturbance to heredity in their novels. Shaw, William Archer, and H.G. Wells were members of the Sociological Society, where eugenics was frequently discussed. Galton and other eugenicists held that ‘mental and moral qualities are hereditary in much the same sense and degree as physical characters’.

This opinion occasionally made its way into literature, as in Galsworthy’s Justice (1910), where

1 NA, II (25 Jan. 1908), 250.
2 Le Roman Expérimental (Paris, [1929]), p. 25.
'THE NEW AGE' UNDER ORAGE

the lawyer attempts to extenuate Falder’s theft in the following manner: ‘His further acts . . . are merely evidence of weak character which is clearly enough his misfortune. But is a man to be lost because he is bred and born with a weak character?’¹ In one instance, a eugenic proposal provided part of the subject matter of a novel: the scheme for the endowment of mothers advocated by Remington in H. G. Wells’s *New Machiavelli* is based upon M. D. Eder’s pamphlet ‘The Endowment of Motherhood’ (published by ‘The New Age Press’ in 1908). None of the Realistic novelists with whom we are concerned analysed heredity and environment with the same remorseless detail as did Zola, but the influence of his emphasis on documentation is evident in their works.

These two traditions, one concerned with the technique of the novel and the other with its subject matter, met in Arnold Bennett. In his conscientious effort to become a great novelist, Bennett studied the craft of fiction as practised by the masters of the Impressionist school. ‘He was the only Englishman who ever talked to me about how books should be written,’ said Ford Madox Ford.² His models were ‘(1) Turgenev, a royal first . . . (2) de Maupassant; (3) [the] de Goncourts; (4) George Moore.’³ Edward Garnett’s introductions to the works of Turgenev, Bennett says, ‘constituted something new in English literary criticism; they cast a fresh light on the art of fiction, completing the fitful illuminations offered by the essays of Mr George Moore. . . . We were utterly convinced that

² *Return to Yesterday* (London, 1931), p. 187. The form of the comment indicates that Ford is distinguishing between native Englishmen and such authors as James and Conrad.

84
THE REALISTIC NOVEL

Turgenev had carried imaginative narrative art further than any man.¹ Two years after he made the preceding list, he added another name: ‘There is scarcely an author—unless it be Henry James—whom I find flawless, and who therefore, I can read in perfect comfort.’²

Bennett’s choice of subjects and his methods of developing them unite him with the Realistic tradition. While writing *Clayhanger*, for example, he journeyed to Burslem where he collected a mass of factual information for inclusion in the novel. When it appeared, he wrote in his journal, ‘On reflection I think that it does contain more sociology than “The O.W.T.”. I had promised this in the prospectus of it, but I was afraid I had not fulfilled the promise.’³ He trained himself to be a ‘philosophic observer—fairly exact, and controlled by scientific principles’; while writing *The Old Wives’ Tale*, he wished that some schoolmistress had written down simply her impression[s] of her years of training; I want them for my novel. The whole of life ought to be covered thus by ‘impressionists’, and a vast mass of new material of facts and sensations collected for use by historians, sociologists and novelists.⁴

Bennett considered sociology an important aspect of the subject matter of the novel; the English founder of that science had developed principles which he found useful in

¹ ‘Adventures Among Russian Fiction’, *The Soul of Russia*, ed. Winifred Stevens (London, 1916), p. 86. This invaluable essay on the popularity of Russian novelists in England has not received the attention it deserves.


³ *Journals*, I, 343, 381-2.

⁴ Ibid., I, 254. Bennett’s use of the word ‘impressionists’ in this context requires some definition. Elsewhere, in discussing Conrad, he says that the first paragraph of ‘The Return’ is ‘perhaps the most dazzling feat of impressionism in modern English’ (*NA*, III [19 Sept. 85)
‘THE NEW AGE’ UNDER ORAGE

narrative development. Of Spencer, England’s ‘greatest philosopher’, he wrote:

When I think how First Principles, by filling me up with the sense of causation everywhere, has altered my whole view of life and undoubtedly immensely improved it, I am confirmed in my opinion of that book. You can see First Principles in nearly every line I write.¹

II. BENNETT’S ‘BOOKS AND PERSONS’

The influence of both Impressionism and Realism on Bennett as a critic is evident in the articles which he contributed to The New Age between 1908 and 1911. During this period, his column ‘Books and Persons’, written under the pseudonym ‘Jacob Tonson’, was the most distinguished literary feature of the magazine. His audience included authors, publishers, and columnists of other weekly journals; one reader asserted that ‘Books and Persons’ was ‘the

¹ NA, VII (30 June 1910), 214; Journals, I, 383.

86
THE REALISTIC NOVEL

most widely read . . . literary causerie of any of our week-
lies'. Bennett was ideally qualified to write such a column. He had an inexhaustible curiosity about the production, sale, and distribution of literature, and as a result his articles give us valuable information about the history of publishing during these years. He spoke frankly of literary fees, agents, publishers, and book prices; he asked his readers to send him lists of the books they bought and tried to compile a list of the most popular authors of his day on the basis of advance sales. One of the best qualities of his column was its forthright bluntness. He attacked the mandarins, the literary arbiters of London, the inanity of current periodicals, and the stupidity of reviewers; he even went so far as to suggest that there was some relation between advertisements and reviews.

But perhaps the most important factor in his success as a literary causeur was that he brought to his column a wide range of reading and that intimate knowledge of creation which only a practitioner can possess. He understood the problems of the author and, through his criticism, tried to create an atmosphere in which literature could flourish. The dominant themes of his articles were these: that the writer should possess a thorough knowledge of his craft and that he should be free to treat any aspect of life in his works without suffering retaliation from a commercial publishing system in which the touchstone of the morally permissible is the innocence of a naïve adolescent.

In 1899, Henry James had pointed out that the novel suffered from the restrictions placed upon it by an adolescent audience:

While society was frank, was free about the incidents and accidents of the human constitution, the novel took the same robust ease as society. The young then were so very young that

1 J. H. Benzies, NA, IX (6 July 1911), 238.
they were not table-high. But they began to grow, and from the moment their little chins rested on the mahogany, Richardson and Fielding began to go under it. There came into being a mistrust of any but the most guarded treatment of the great relation between men and women, the constant world-renewal, which was the conspicuous sign that whatever the prose picture of life was prepared to take upon itself, it was not prepared to take upon itself not to be superficial.¹

The result was that the circulation of many important novels was restricted. Bennett found, for example, that none of the following could be obtained at the twelve lending libraries in Glasgow: the works of Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett; Anna Karenina; Tess of the D’Urbervilles; Jude the Obscure; and Tono-Bungay. The situation became much worse when, in 1909, the circulating libraries, which were the largest purchasers and distributors of books, instituted a censorship system and apparently applied it in a haphazard manner.

Bennett made enquiries and recounted the immediate cause of the censorship in The New Age. A socially prominent woman had been shocked to find her daughter reading a book from a circulating library which, she was sure, would corrupt the child’s morals. She went immediately to a member of the Cabinet and demanded that action of some sort be taken. ‘The result,’ said Bennett, ‘was that “certain machinery” was set in motion, and “certain representations” were made to the libraries; indeed, the libraries were given to understand that unless they did something themselves “certain steps” would be taken.’³

A number of books were banned, and the circulation of others was restricted by supplying them only after they had been requested ten or twelve times. It seemed for

¹ The House of Fiction, p. 56. ² NA, VII (26 May 1910), 86. ³ NA, IV (23 Dec. 1909), 184.
a time that adults might be allowed to read only books fit for children. Mistakes were inevitable, and absurd situations arose; one reader, for example, was told that Henry James’s volume of essays *Italian Hours* was an ‘improper book’.1 These incidents are noteworthy not only because Bennett crusaded tirelessly against the censorship, but also because they illustrate the prevalent delicacy with regard to the unmentionable and the unpleasant that exercised an important influence on the publication of books and periodicals. Henry James had stated the arguments in favour of freedom for the novelist in the abstract; Bennett, who placed more emphasis on the novel as a presentation of all aspects of contemporary life, vigorously applied these arguments to particular cases.

Contemporary periodicals were to Bennett a notorious example of how the fear of offending the public resulted in the exclusion of controversial essays and realistic fiction. His attack on *The Fortnightly, The Nineteenth Century and After*, and *The Cornhill* was quoted in Chapter 1; aside from Ford’s *English Review* (which he said came ‘as near to the ideal as any magazine of pure letters is likely to get’)2 the only literary periodical which won his grudging approval was *Blackwood’s Magazine* (because it printed stories by Joseph Conrad; ‘In Scotland, whatever their manners, they do read’). ‘Why is it,’ he wrote,

1 When *The Times* printed a letter concerning the incident, the libraries were deluged with requests for ‘a rather improper book by Mr Henry James—a sex novel of Italian life’. *NA*, VI (20 Jan. 1910), 276.

2 *NA*, IV (14 Jan. 1909), 245. ‘Many thanks for your kindly reference to me in *The New Age,*’ Ford wrote to Bennett just before relinquishing the editorship of *The English Review*. ‘You are . . . the only one I know who has in the least appreciated what I have been trying to do and that I have been disinterested in the effort.’ Douglas Goldring, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite* (London, 1948), p. 148.
that in England among the half-dozen really big and wealthy publishing houses there is not one that cares or dares to cater for the average intelligent man? The popular magazines of this country are a disgrace to its intelligence, unworthy of its intelligence, below its intelligence. They are prudish to a degree that even New England would laugh at. They pander to every vice except that of concupiscence. They boycott the real life of the nation. Artistically they are deplorable. As literature they scarcely exist. And if they do happen to touch a genuine subject they debase it by a frivolous insincerity.¹

If the short stories they contained displayed even a modicum of realism, it disappeared in time to preserve the traditional happy ending. Bennett was amazed to find, on reading a story in the popular American magazine *McClure’s*, that ‘it does not end happily. Scarcely expecting to be believed, I reiterate that it does not end happily. . . . Why cannot we have such a magazine in England?’²

When a realistic writer did succeed in publishing his work, it was often criticized solely on the grounds of its ‘unpleasant’ subject matter.

As sure as ever a novelist endeavours to paint a complete picture of life in this honest, hypocritical country of bad restaurants and good women; as sure as ever he hints that all is not for the best in the best of all possible islands, some witling is bound to come forward and point out with wise finger that life is not all black.³

The arbiters of literary taste were largely responsible for this situation, and Bennett did not hesitate to attack them when their moral austerity or sheer ignorance blinded them to the virtues of a work. His protests were not limited to unfavourable reviews of works by authors he

¹ *NA*, VI (16 Dec. 1909), 159. ² Ibid. ³ *NA*, II (9 May 1908), 33.
admired; he also attacked critics when they praised a great author for the wrong reasons.¹

In opposition to what he considered the prudery and provincial narrowness of reviewers, Bennett attempted to introduce Continental literary standards into the discussion of English literature. His long residence in France had given him a close acquaintance with current French literature, and about one-fifth of his articles were devoted to that subject. He discussed Anatole France, the de Gourcours, Rémy de Gourmont (‘the greatest unappreciated writer in France today’),² Romain Rolland, Gide, and (incessantly) Stendhal. Nor did he neglect contemporary poets. ‘Who among you has ever heard of Paul Valéry? Yet Paul Valéry is one of the very finest intelligences in France today,’ he wrote in 1911.³ Claudel, Péguy, and Corbière were singled out for special mention.⁴ His discussions of French literature, however, were not to prove as important in influencing literary taste as his enthusiasm for Russian novelists. They led him to conclude that ‘French realism is an artificial and feeble growth compared with the spontaneous, unconscious realism of the Russians’, and that ‘there simply are no novels in England, and very few in France’;⁵ and it was largely through his influence that the younger generation came to hold the same opinion.

By 1908 Turgenev and Tolstoy were accepted as

¹ As, for example, in the Athenaeum review of Conrad’s Set of Six, which Bennett compared to ‘the antics of a provincial mayor around a foreign monarch sojourning in his town’. NA, III (19 Sept. 1908), 412.
³ NA, VIII (23 Feb. 1911), 397.
masters of the realistic tradition; in 1909, Bennett added
another name to their ranks. A volume of short stories by
Chekhov had appeared in 1903 (The Black Monk and Other
Stories, published by Duckworth), but soon went out of
print. After the same publisher issued another volume of
his stories in 1908, Bennett wrote:

The progress of every art is an apparent progress from con-
ventionality to realism. The basis of convention remains, but
as the art develops it finds more and more subtle methods,
fitting life to the convention or the convention to life—
whichever you please. Chekhov’s tales mark a definite new
conquest in this long struggle. . . . He seems to have achieved
absolute realism. (But there is no absolute, and one day
somebody—probably a Russian—will carry realism farther.)
His climaxes are never strained; nothing is ever idealized,
sentimentalized, etherealized; no part of the truth is left out,
no part is exaggerated. There is no cleverness, no startling feat
of virtuosity. All appears simple, candid, almost child-like.
. . . Beneath the outward simplicity of his work is concealed
the most wondrous artifice, the artifice that is embedded deep
in nearly all great art. All we English novelists ought to study
The Kiss and The Black Monk. They will delight every person
of fine taste, but to the artist they are a profound lesson. We
have no writer, and we never have had one, nor has France,
who could mould the material of life, without distorting it,
into such complex form to such an end of beauty.¹

Shortly after this passage was written, translations of
Chekhov’s stories began to appear in The New Age. Al-
though Frank Swinnerton may be correct in asserting
that ‘the admiration for Chekhov which spread among
English writers and readers dates from the publication of
two volumes of his tales in 1916’,² his influence was clearly
present at an earlier date. It has been assumed, for example,

¹ NA, IV (18 Mar. 1909), 423.
² Background with Chorus, p. 174.
that Katherine Mansfield was introduced to Chekhov during her visit to the Continent in 1909.\(^1\) This assumption is unnecessary in view of the fact that Bennett discussed his short stories in *The New Age* earlier that year.

Even more important was Bennett’s praise of Dostoevsky. ‘I thought I had read all the chief works of the five great Russian novelists [Gogol, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov, Dostoievsky],’ he wrote in 1910,

but last year I came across one of Dostoievsky’s, *The Brothers Karamazov*, of which I had not heard. It was a French translation, in two thick volumes. I thought it contained some of the greatest scenes that I had ever encountered in fiction. . . . The scene with the old monk at the beginning . . . is in the very grandest heroical manner. There is nothing in either English or French prose literature to hold a candle to it. . . . And now, Mr Heinemann, when are we going to have a complete Dostoievsky in English?\(^2\)

As one who attached great importance to form, he was not without reservations about the construction of Dostoievsky’s novels. ‘They have especially the grave fault of imperfection, that fault which Turgenev and Flaubert avoided,’ he said. ‘They are tremendously unlevel, badly constructed, both in large outline and in detail.’\(^3\) But it is significant that Bennett deleted the following sentence in reprinting a number of these articles in 1917: ‘In spite of the recent wave of enthusiasm for Dostoievsky, I am still

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\(^2\) *NA*, VI (31 Mar. 1910), 519.

\(^3\) Ibid.
of [the] opinion that nobody alive or dead has written finer novels than Turgenev.¹ For his appreciation grew rapidly in the months following his first mention of The Brothers Karamazov. A year later, he wrote:

Personally, I class this work with Stendhal’s Chartreuse de Parme, as the most heroical novel in European literature. It contains about a dozen absolutely colossal figures. It is fiction raised to the highest power. Stendhal is perhaps more even and more easily comprehensible and more urbane; but Dostoevsky goes deeper and rises higher.²

His enthusiasm was not without effect. Perhaps Mr Heinemann noticed Bennett’s suggestion regarding publication, and perhaps Constance Garnett noticed the following passage: ‘The crying need of the day, in the translation department, is a complete and faithful Dostoievsky. . . . It is the duty of one or [an]other of our publishers to commission Mrs Constance Garnett to do it.’³ Six weeks after this passage appeared, Mr Heinemann announced that he would publish the principal novels of Dostoievsky, translated by Constance Garnett.⁴

Bennett’s opinions also seem to have been influential among the young. Katherine Mansfield, John Middleton Murry, Frank Swinnerton, Richard Curle, and Gilbert Cannan agreed, when they met one evening in 1912, that The Brothers Karamazov was the greatest novel ever written, La Chartreuse de Parme its only second.⁵ ‘That “occasional causerie” of his in The New Age, wrote Frank Swinnerton,

familiarized us with the language and views of Parisian critics. It was quite different from the literary letters of C. K. S.

¹ NA, VII (16 June 1910), 159. ² NA, VIII (23 Mar. 1911), 492. ³ NA, VIII (9 Feb. 1911), 349. ⁴ NA, VIII (23 Mar. 1911), 492. ⁵ Background with Chorus, p. 145.
THE REALISTIC NOVEL

[Clement Shorter] and Claudius Clear [W. Robertson Nicoll] and the sedate gossip of other bookmen; and it opened our eyes. The Continent, we found, was rich in authors to be read and judged and perhaps emulated. How exciting that was; and what a challenge to intelligence. . . . His words about Russian writers—he once declared that the five greatest novelists were all Russian—made his readers examine the meagre representation of Russian novelists standing on their shelves, and long for more.¹

When Books and Persons, a selection from the articles that had appeared in The New Age, was published in 1917, Rebecca West wrote to Bennett as follows:

Dear Mr. Bennett,

I was for two years forced by a benevolent government to attend a cookery class every Friday afternoon, and it was my habit to make these hours that would otherwise have been unprofitable more valuable than the rest of my education put together by reading Jacob Tonson. . . .²

The immediate source of the value of Bennett’s articles for young authors, however, was not his praise of Dostoevsky, for The Brothers Karamazov was not to be published until 1912, and it took some time for writers to see how an alien method and an alien intensity could be absorbed into the English tradition.³ Most of them were closer in the technique and subject matter of their novels to the tradition of Bennett; thus his influence worked primarily through his precepts and his own creative works. ‘If this

¹ Ibid., p. 142.
² Letter dated 4 July [1917?], now in the library of University College, London.
³ Bennett’s attempt to emulate this intensity in Hilda Lessways (1911) probably resulted from his enthusiasm for Dostoievsky at the time. It is ironic that Virginia Woolf should have chosen this novel, which represents a sincere effort on Bennett’s part to free himself from the limitations of his usual methods, as exemplifying them.

95
column has any interest of originality,’ he said, ‘it is that it expresses the point of view of the creative artist as distinguished from that of the critic.’\textsuperscript{1} He could cite specific weaknesses in early novels and point out the technical methods that would improve a work. Perhaps he would recommend that the author listen more carefully to ordinary conversations, in order to remove the literary artificiality of his dialogue; he might mention inconsistencies in the conception of a character that resulted from an inadequate study of an age group or class; if an author had difficulty in effecting transitions from present to past time, he recommended a careful study of Balzac’s novels.

‘“Trifles!” you may say. Art is made up of trifles. The difference between first-class and second-class in art is only a series of trifles.’\textsuperscript{2}

III. THE DOCTRINES OF REALISM

Arnold Bennett was as conscientious a craftsman as any novelist of his time. His limitations were primarily limitations of talent; perhaps his painstaking attention to technique resulted from an attempt to achieve through skill what in the end must come from inspiration. Whatever its source, this attention makes his criticism continuously interesting as a record of the methods of a representative novelist who understood and emulated many of the techniques that were shared by the greatest of his contemporaries.

His indebtedness to the Impressionist tradition is clearly evident in his discussions of ‘composition’ and character portrayal. While his own novels, like those of the Realists, were based upon a laborious accumulation of detail, he realized that the vividness of imaginative representation

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\item \textit{NA,} V (21 Oct. 1909), 461.
\item \textit{NA,} V (19 Aug. 1909), 320.
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would suffer if this labour should call attention to itself. ‘I would like to ask Mr Galsworthy,’ he said in discussing *Fraternity*, ‘if he has decided definitely for himself that minute descriptions of the faces of characters ever, save by extremely rare hazard, leave any impression on the reader.’¹ In this case the ‘impression’ has been blurred and hence does not evince a discriminating artistic consciousness. The opposite fault is that of caricature, which implicitly condemns the recording consciousness of the novelist as being either insensitive to finer discriminations, or, worse yet, as lacking in detachment, the essence of artistic creation.

Wells once suggested that Bennett give one of his heroes a distinguishing trait, such as a bit of vanity about the shape of his nose; to Bennett such a suggestion was replete of the outworn tricks of the Victorians. ‘You still cling to the Dickens-Thackeray standards, and judge by them,’ Bennett replied. ‘As when you say: “How like Becky Sharp!” Would you say: “How like Eugenie Grandet, or Madame Bovary, or Maisie?” The strongly marked character, the eccentric, the sharply-defined type, is the easiest thing in the world to do.’² The same criticism of portraying types rather than characters is implicit in Bennett’s comments on *Tono-Bungay*. After distinguishing carefully between the protagonist, who writes in the first person, and Wells himself, he mentions some of the former’s faults:

The one other slip that George Ponderevo has made is a slight yielding to the temptation of caricature, out of place in a realistic book. . . . So much for the narrator, whose ‘I’ writes the book. I assume that Wells purposely left these matters

¹ *NA*, IV (11 Mar. 1909), 405.
uncorrected, as being essential to the completeness of George’s self-revelation.¹

The assumption seems gratuitous.

If Galsworthy erred in describing faces in detail (the result, perhaps, of an overzealous realism), he at least attempted to individualize them in doing so. A contrasting fault is not devoting enough attention to individuality, and Bennett criticized Conrad, one of his favourite authors, on this ground. Speaking of the inevitable narrator in Conrad’s works, he said:

This peculiarity . . . detracts from the realistic authority of the work. For by the time you have got to the end of A Set of Six, you have met a whole series of men who all talk just as well as Mr. Conrad writes, and upon calm reflection the existence of a whole series of such men must seem to you very improbable.²

‘Out of place in a realistic book’; ‘detracts from the realistic authority of the work’: realism was paramount, and it allowed but the slightest deviations in presentation.

Characters, according to Bennett, should be grouped pictorially. He says in discussing Fraternity that Galsworthy has not ‘composed’ his picture by distinguishing ‘background’ from ‘foreground’;³ the pictorial analogy, which is also employed by James, Ford, and Galsworthy himself (cf. note 3, p. 82), may have important implications which we cannot pause to examine here. ‘The true art of fiction,’ said Bennett,

consists, first and mainly, in a beautiful composition. But in Anglo-Saxon countries any writer who can induce both a grin and a tear on the same page, no matter how insolent his

6. 'AND I DRIVE THE 'BUS THAT MARY RIDES ON'

by Walter Sickert
contempt for composition, is sure of that immortality his contemporaries can award.¹

This was his fundamental complaint about Victorian novelists: they substituted sentimentality for careful construction. His own aim was to achieve what he called a ‘synthetic impressionism’; ‘What I aim at,’ he wrote to Wells, ‘is the expression of general moods, whether of a person or a whole scene, a constant “synthesizing” of emotion.’² The pictorial analogy is extended in the following passage:

In a well-designed picture the eye is drawn chiefly to one particular spot. If the eye is drawn with equal force to several different spots, then we reproach the painter for having ‘scattered’ the interest of the picture. Similarly when writing a novel. A novel must have one, two, or three figures that easily overlap the rest. These figures must be in the foreground, and the rest in the middle-distance or in the background.³

Very well, one may say; and what then? Should there not be some focus in the action toward which the characters move? No such principle of composition is mentioned in his articles in *The New Age*, and Bennett’s other critical writings lead one to think that he did not consider such a focus necessary. Life is a series of minor and major crises; perhaps he felt that it would be unrealistic and in some way Victorian if the novel were to move towards a dénouement. Like life, the novel is a continuous process, plotless. He praised the ‘astounding thoroughness and completeness’ of Eden Phillpotts’s twenty-five novels on

¹ *NA*, III (11 July 1908), 212.
² *Journals*, I, 16; *Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells*, p. 96.
Dartmoor;¹ in writing of Romain Rolland’s *Jean Christophe*, he said,

Everyone who has begun this novel—one of the most extraordinary of modern times—will want to finish it. And no one ever will finish it, for it will never be finished. And there is no reason why it should be. Such is my opinion.²

This reminds one of Wells’s statement that Victorian novels were not long enough to satisfy his insatiable appetite.³ Both he and Bennett seemed to feel that there was a virtue in quantity as such. In planning *The Old Wives’ Tale*, Bennett decided that ‘my book must “go one better” than [de Maupassant’s] *Une Vie*, and that to this end it must be the life history of two women instead of only one’.⁴ One suspects he spoke at least half in earnest.

Bennett saw the novel as an essentially static composition, its organization consisting in a consistently sympathetic attitude towards the variegated episodes that life, and the novel, dispose in temporal sequence. In praising Chekhov, he says: ‘As you read him you fancy that he must always have been saying to himself: “Life is good enough for me. I won’t alter it. I will set it down as it is.” Such is the tribute to his success which he forces from you.’⁵ In Bennett’s canon of critical judgments, this is high praise. We find a similar attitude expressed in his novels. *The Old Wives’ Tale* and *Clayhanger* each contain one italicized sentence. In the former, it appears in the last few pages as Constance meditates on her life: ‘She had many dissatisfactions. But she rose superior to them. When she

¹ *NA*, VIII (9 Mar. 1911), 445.
² *NA*, III (18 July 1908), 232.
⁴ *The Old Wives’ Tale* (London, 1911), p. vii. (This preface did not appear in the first edition of the novel, 1908.)
⁵ *NA*, IV (18 Mar. 1909), 423.
'THE NEW AGE' UNDER ORAGE

surveyed her life, and life in general, she would think, with a sort of tart but not sour cheerfulness; “Well, that is what life is!” Near the end of Clayhanger, Edwin says to himself: ‘What a fine thing life is!’ In each instance we have a generalization which implies its absorption of the texture of the book. The meaning lies in the attitude of the protagonist, or the writer, toward the incidents represented.

The communication of this attitude required a carefully maintained impartiality (akin to what James referred to as the ‘detachment . . . of the observant and recording and interpreting mind’) on the part of the novelist. This did not mean that social criticism was to be excluded from the novel. His own novels, Bennett said, contained criticisms of society ‘designed to make you uncomfortable’. This was an inevitable result of a painting the world as it is, with all its virtues and faults. He made, however, a careful distinction between the novel as a picture of reality and the novel as a vehicle of propaganda. He rebukes Galsworthy for philosophizing: in discussing The Man of Property and The Country House, he suggests that the author should contrive to take a walk with his prejudice against the successful class, and lose it. First-rate writers have no business with hostilities. First-class writers ought to be aware that one kind of man is just as deserving of sympathy as another, and that to shed tears over the weak and oppressed is a sign of facile emotionalism rather than of an ordered and powerful imagination. It is not morally reprehensible to live in Bedford Court Mansions.

1 The Old Wives’ Tale, p. 609.
4 Ibid.
Bennett found the same fault in Wells’s novels. In *Tono-Bungay*, one of George Ponderevo’s less attractive traits was his bitter hatred of people whom he found ignorant or conventional.

The savagery of his description of the family of Frapp, the little Nonconformist baker, and of the tea-drinkers in the housekeeper’s room at Bladesover, somewhat impairs even the astounding force of this, George’s first and only novel—not because he exaggerates the offensiveness of the phenomena, but because he unscientifically fails to perceive that these people are just as deserving of compassion as himself.¹

‘Why this immense animus against the “nace” class of person, since we are all human together?’, wrote Bennett in a letter to Wells concerning *Kipps*. ‘Am I to understand that in your opinion as a purposeful observer of life the “nace” class is more ridiculous, or less worthy of sympathy, or less the outcome of natural and inevitable causes [sic] than any other class? ’² If we can discern the causes of human behaviour, our prejudice falls away with the realization that people are not directly responsible for their faults. In his journal, Bennett wrote: ‘Essential characteristic of the really great novelist: a Christlike, all-embracing compassion.’³

The compassionate detachment and intellectual curiosity that Bennett advocated as a critic are evident in his own novels. When *The Old Wives’ Tale* appeared in 1908, J. E. Barton, the writer of the review in *The New Age*, indicated the importance of these qualities in an age devoted to social reform. In all of Bennett’s works, he says, the praise of life—first function of the artist—precedes its

¹ *NA*, IV (4 Mar. 1909), 384.
² *Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells*, p. 127.
³ *Journals*, I, 19 (from the year 1896).
analysis. And his Socialism (or Radicalism, or whatever he calls it) is likewise subjected to aesthetic laws. . . .

His characters neither wriggle on an entomologist’s pin, nor pirouette dialectically, as properly galvanized impersonations of Will-to-Live are expected to do. . . . The human comedy, as presented by writers like Mr Wells and Mr Shaw, is a vehicle for certain versions of the modern gospel. I enjoy them. . . . But there are seasons when I wish to contemplate this splendid, turbulent and exciting modern epoch with pure pleasure, with no moral or philosophic obsession whatever; to gaze enrapt on this world of swift transit, large hotels, crumbling creeds, cosmopolitan culture, incredible wealth, fierce materialism, and recrudescent superstitions, without one single impulse to reprove it, or pity it, or put it right. This is where Mr Bennett comes in. . . . The quintessence of life is surely this force, which life alone possesses, of persuading us that to live and to feel are in themselves immensely desirable. An artist is he who discerns this quintessence, condenses it, and therewith impregnates his creation. . . .

Useless? Inactive for the regeneration of society? My answer is that men must feel and understand life thoroughly before they tinker with it; that art outlines philosophy, as the Greeks were aware, just because it roots itself in that sure ground of instinct and emotion with which the philosopher—his eye on the horizon—is apt to lose touch.¹

At the beginning of this chapter, Bennett was said to be indebted to the Impressionist tradition for his conception of form in the novel, and to the Realist tradition for his subject matter. This combination of interests creates many problems; for if one strives for inclusiveness, attempting to record as many aspects of life as possible, it will be

¹ J. E. Barton, ‘Fiction and Mr Arnold Bennett’, NA, IV (3 Dec. 1908), 110-11. Mr Barton claims he is ‘neither a professional reviewer nor a Socialist, but simply a quiet provincial reader who happens to have read Mr Bennett entire’. 104
THE REALISTIC NOVEL

difficult for him to maintain the strict economy of means advocated by those seeking formal perfection. There is evidence that during this period Bennett’s conception of the novel was changing, as witnessed by one of his later discussions of James, that master of formal composition:

On the debit side:–He is tremendously lacking in emotional power. Also his sense of beauty is over-sophisticated and wants originality. Also his attitude towards the spectacle of life is at bottom conventional, timid, and undecided. Also he seldom chooses themes of first-class importance, and when he does choose such a theme he never fairly bites it and makes it bleed. Also his curiosity is limited. . . . What it all comes to is merely that his subject matter does not as a rule interest me.¹

A correspondent, who must have been aware of ‘Jacob Tonson’s’ true identity, pointed out how different his opinions were from those of Arnold Bennett, who had praised James six years earlier.² It seems that by 1911, Bennett considered subject matter more important than form.

Between 1908 and 1910, Bennett’s attitude toward the novel established the tone of The New Age’s criticism as a whole. His emphasis on technique, his demand that the novelist be given freedom in choosing his subject matter, and his insistence that propaganda had no place in literature were of unquestionable value during that period. Eventually, however, criticisms of the novels of Wells and Bennett began to appear in the magazine, and soon their whole attitude towards fiction was questioned. J. E. Barton’s review of Clayhanger cautiously indicates the form that these criticisms were to take and illustrates the attitude

² J. H. Hobbs, NA, VIII (10 Nov. 1910), 46.
of many contributors to *The New Age* by the end of 1910:

As the first of a contemplated trilogy of novels, it implies in the author a conscious maturity and range of synoptic power which hitherto, with his irrepressible ardour in experiment, he has not so definitely asserted. And it implies, also, by its restriction of matter and scene, a very deliberate cult of patient realism; a cult which I call ambitious, because it is the hardest path a novelist can tread, and a form of art which creates, as of set purpose, many of the difficulties which it has to conquer. . . .

In our young days we all chanted the maxims that beauty lurks in the eye of the artist, that no sort or scene of life is dull if really apprehended, that romance (fundamentally) is universal. Excellent, no doubt; and extremely true as corrective of popular preconceptions in the sphere of art. But subject after all does count, even for the realist. . . .

To hold the balance scrupulously between his characters and their fate; to concede nothing to our common illusion that we are masters in our own house; to be satisfied with an intellectual survey of the world, unprepossessed by sentimental cravings; these, it would appear, are the aims which have guided him. They play an enormous part, I know, in the modern artist’s conception of his own function. In fact, he deceives himself. He thinks he is founded on a rock, superior to the sands of time and evolution. The probable truth is that this modern notion of art is only the aesthetic obverse of a quite ephemeral ‘scientific’ phase through which the world has been passing. . . .

To view life from the outside . . . and to choose such material as may be treated without bias one way or the other, is no more the essence of art than it is the essence of fighting or feeding. . . . Something even more imperious than reason admonishes us that life’s inmost secret lies, not in the slow adaptation of man to circumstances, but in his costly victories and splendid defeats.\(^1\)

\(^1\) *NA*, VIII (15 Dec. 1910), 160.
THE REALISTIC NOVEL

As in the case of the drama, we find that realism was being questioned at this date, but that no coherent critical framework had been developed to support the new attitude. At this point Orage, who had been exclusively occupied with his editorial duties and political activities, began commenting on current conceptions of the novel in his occasional dialogues entitled ‘Unedited Opinions’. Considerable attention was devoted to the theory of the novel between 1910 and 1914; these were the years in which James, Bennett, and Wells wrote some of their most important essays on the subject. Although the following discussion will carry us beyond the period indicated in the title of this part of the study, it involves many works written during those years, and can be seen as the culmination of a certain line of literary development. It will also indicate the new direction that literary criticism in The New Age was to take after 1910.