

CHAPTER XXIV

ENGLISH FICTION IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

THE first immense influence of the century in the literature of fiction was certainly Sir Walter Scott. I am sure that you know a good deal about him already. What I have to say about him here will consequently be very short; but it is very important. I need not speak of his novels in detail. What is necessary for you to know is why they have become one of the treasures of English literature; you must be able to understand the reason of their merit. It is not because of style. They have no style to speak of, for Sir Walter was almost as indifferent to finish in his prose as he was in his poetry. Nor is their merit due to the fact that the stories are at all wonderful in themselves as to plot or plan. The whole value of the Waverley novels is in the story-teller's way of telling his story; and I hope you will be patient with me while I try to explain what I mean by his "way." I have already said that it is not style. Scott's power of telling a story differs from that of most other novelists who appeared before or since his time, and the difference lies in his skill to make his characters seem alive. I have only said *seem* alive. They are not always really alive. Shakespeare's characters are really alive; so are some of Jane Austen's. Scott's do not always reach this high degree of creative perfection. You feel that men do not act exactly and speak exactly as Scott makes them act and speak; you feel that some of his people are impossibly good, too heroic, therefore too unnatural. Occasionally you do find really living figures—the proof of great genius; but this is not common. Nevertheless, the figures always at first have an appearance of life. Scott managed this in quite a

peculiar way—by an enormous mastery of detail. When he puts a Highland chief before you, you can see the man, outwardly, exactly as he was; you can study his dress, his port, his action; you can hear his mountain accent; you see all his exterior as vividly as if he were there. This is what makes Scott's creations so wonderful. But inwardly the man of whom I speak, this Highland chief, is not so perfectly made. His accent is quite correct, but his emotions and thoughts are not always quite real. We feel that the real man would have thought and felt somewhat differently under the same circumstances; then we find that we have been looking at a ghost, not a man. With Shakespeare it is altogether otherwise. Shakespeare does not bother himself about the outer man as to details; he gives you the real thought, the real feeling only; then the soul that he made immediately covers itself with warm flesh and becomes alive. But Scott's figures are very often like those Scandinavian goblins which were all hollow behind.

For all that, there is life enough in Scott's personages to make them wonderful; and besides this partial life, there is a real general life in the books, borrowed from the writer's own mind and heart, a generous vivacity, a noble idealism, a fire of purpose, such as no other novelist has given us in historical romance. There are only two books of the whole set in which these qualities do not appear—books written when the man was sick and dying. He achieved something new in the mere fact of making history alive, changing it into romance. I think there is no doubt that he inspired Macaulay to some extent with those new ideas about history-making which have influenced all the great histories of our time. But his great work was in reforming and inspiring fiction and romance. You must not think of him merely as a great figure in *English* literature. He was a European force. He influenced and changed almost every literature of consequence in Europe. He powerfully influenced French literature, German literature, Italian literature, and Spanish literature. His books have been translated into most lan-

guages. And I may venture here to express an opinion that if he has not already influenced Japanese literature, the day will almost certainly come when you will feel his influence all about you. Do not think of Scott as an expired power; he is a living force even to-day, though you must not look to him as a master of style, or anything of that sort. He is only a very great story-teller, one of the greatest story-tellers that the world has ever seen.

You know that Scott lived well into the present century: he died in 1832. The next great figure in this branch of literature was born, unlike Scott, within the century, in 1812. This was Charles Dickens. For many reasons, Dickens must be considered an eccentricity in English literature. Though a very great master of prose, much greater than Scott, he had no education or culture to speak of. He had only the plainest and simplest school training in his boyhood, and had to get out into the world and earn his living, or study how to earn it, long before he became a man. Without going into details, I will only tell you that he began life as a newspaper reporter, doing chiefly shorthand writing in that capacity, which is as severe drudgery as any man of brains could be condemned to. But he was full of youth and health and spirits, and he actually found time between his daily tasks to write down the curious impressions that came to his mind, and to put them into the form of little sketches for publication. I do not think I need tell you anything further about his remarkable and successful life. I will say only that he first became famous through the publication of a little volume of comical sketches, called "The Pickwick Papers," which show the peculiarity of his genius as much as anything that he afterwards wrote. And he wrote, besides stories and sketches, about twenty-five big books. He died only in 1870.

Dickens would be for you a very difficult author to study as regards the bulk of his work, for it relates chiefly to English city life, particularly the life of London. But you can study him, even without knowing anything about

London life, in one or two of his novels, and in some short stories of a very strange kind. Of the novels I should most recommend to you the "Tale of Two Cities," which is a story of the French Revolution; and of the short stories, I should especially recommend a group of railroad sketches, published under the title of "Mugby Junction." I mention these last chiefly because they show in a very strong way the power of Dickens to put ghosts into inanimate objects, to make even railroads and telegraphs become alive.

Dickens had two great faculties. He had the power of giving a factitious animation to objects; and he had the power of seizing and painting certain peculiarities of people, much as certain great painters have. But I must tell you that his greatness is within certain rather narrow limits. There is now, I believe, in Tokyo a French artist who has been making outline drawings of what he sees in the everyday life of the streets. I suppose that you have seen some of them. They are not flattering to Japanese feelings. Some people become very angry on seeing them. Yet it is impossible to say that they are not true. There is truth in them; and yet you feel that they are unjust, sometimes apparently malicious. What is the reason of this? The reason is that this man, who is very clever indeed, observes a certain peculiarity, and slightly exaggerates it so as to produce what we call a caricature. A caricature is the exaggeration of a defect, or a funny peculiarity, or an eccentricity; it is never the exaggeration of anything good. It is thus an art of drawing which is of great use in affecting public opinion during times of political excitement. It is at once true, and yet not true; according to the wish of the artist, it can be made almost wicked. Now the talent or genius of Charles Dickens as a novelist was chiefly the same kind of genius that is possessed by the caricaturist—the faculty for instantly observing a peculiarity, and exaggerating it picturesquely. Sometimes Dickens gives us sweet and good characters, but even then he always exaggerates something—just as the artist of the London *Punch*, when he

draws a beautiful girl, never fails to define some characteristic in a somewhat exaggerated way, so as to create a type of character. Most often Dickens' characters are not sweet and good, but simply odd and downright wicked. But they are all wonderful. They are all at once true and not true, just as a caricature is. It is very important to recognize this fact before you begin to study Dickens. What you have to learn from him will be the great literary value of the special faculty to which I referred. For example, one of his characters, Rigaud, has a very long nose and a very peculiar smile; whenever he smiles his nose seems to come down over his moustache, and his moustache seems to go up under his nose. Now this is more than mere play, more than a mere caricature. If you have seen such a smile, and most of us have seen it, then you know that it means evil. The whole man is represented by his smile, and we know a great deal about him long before he shows himself to be thoroughly wicked. Almost every character in Dickens is described by some such peculiarity, bad or good. The method is not altogether untrue to common human nature. In real life we generally remember people by something peculiar in the voice, the walk, the attitude, or the habit of speech. What we think of the peculiarity, is another matter. Dickens showed it always as the caricaturist sees it, not only distinctly but exaggeratedly. And he saw men's hearts somewhat after the same manner. A character did not appear to him the marvelously complex thing that it really is; he distinguished it only by some peculiarity. And this is to say that he saw chiefly the eccentricities of people, and that these eccentricities remain in his mind as the only symbols of their existence. I therefore say that such an art is limited. To come back to the case of the French artist above referred to, I should make the same observation. He is a very clever artist in a certain direction, but not the noblest direction; and he could not be a great painter. So Dickens was a very great artist in certain directions, but not the highest

directions; and we cannot call him a great painter of human nature. Rather he was a marvellous caricaturist, a genius in the delineation of peculiarities, and peculiarities mostly of a small kind.

Remember, these observations are but general criticism. As general criticism I believe they are certainly true. But as there are always exceptions to general rules and general statements, so there are pages in Dickens which deserve higher praise than the foregoing remarks would indicate. He is sometimes able to give us sensations of fear of a very strange kind—ghostly fear; and this is always an approach to serious art. At other times he can draw tears, or fill us with a sudden passionate admiration for something noble and good; this is more than an approach to great art—it is great art. In the “Tale of Two Cities” you will find examples of all his powers. But I must say that he does not always rise to such heights; he generally remains at the stage which I have already indicated, the world of caricature. But you must not think that Dickens always wished to caricature. Sometimes he did, as in “The Pickwick Papers”; but generally he did not. He made the caricatures only because he could not help it, because he saw life exactly as a caricaturist sees it, and imagined that he was seeing and feeling like other people, although he was really not able to see or to feel like a common man.

Dickens took for his own subjects generally the middle and the poorer classes of English life, especially London life. The aristocracy and the upper classes were little known to him. But he had two great contemporaries, who formed with him the great triumvirate of nineteenth century novelists. I say “novelists,” because, although Walter Scott was so great a writer, his books must be regarded more as romances than as novels in the true sense. The triumvirate consisted of Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton, and Thackeray. Whatever differences of opinion there may be among critics as to the merits of other novelists of the age, I am quite sure that no other writer of real novels can be given a place beside

these three. One of them was the greatest of all English novelists except, perhaps, Fielding. We shall speak of him last.

Lord Lytton is, then, the next figure to consider. There were two Lord Lyttons, father and son. Of the son, known in literature as "Owen Meredith," I shall speak in a lecture upon Victorian poets. The father—Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer-Lytton—one of the most remarkable of modern novelists, was born in 1803 and died in 1873. He was a Cambridge man, a member of Parliament, a great society gentleman, and has every advantage that rank, wealth, and education could give a man. Such a person ought to have done extraordinary work; and Lord Lytton did extraordinary work.

The whole of his books would represent about thirty volumes in their present form—large volumes—some containing two or more different stories. And when you remember that this great work was done by a man who not only gave much of his time to society, but a great deal of his time also to politics and to diplomacy—for, besides being a member of Parliament, he also held many offices at different times; among others, that of Secretary of State—we cannot but wonder at the industry which could accomplish so much, even in the space of forty-five years. But there is a greater wonder than the bulk in this work, always highly finished; there is also the wonder of its versatility. No other great English novelist ever wrote in so many different ways, and upon so many different things. It is hard to believe that all these novels and stories were written by the same person. They can be divided into groups. Each group is marked by a different tone, a different style, almost as if a different writer had created each group. He began with highly fashionable novels, such as "Falkland" and "Pelham," fashionable novels not only in the fact that they picture aristocratic life, but in the fact that they are written in a peculiar epigrammatic style which reflects faithfully the tone of society of a certain quality. Next he turned to

historical romances, and produced quite a number, each upon an entirely different phase of history. "Harold" is the story of the king who died in battle with William the Conqueror. "The Last of the Barons" is a story of Italian life in the fifteenth century. "The Last Days of Pompeii" is, as its name implies, a tale of the first century after Christ. And there are several others upon equally diverse subjects. Another group consists of novels of crime, which at that time were quite popular, perhaps because of the influence of French writers who distinguished themselves in the same direction. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these is "Eugene Aram"; you will remember that the poet Thomas Hood wrote a famous poem about the same schoolmaster who became a murderer. Another group of novels by Bulwer are all novels of middle class domestic life, such as "The Caxtons," and "What will he do with it?" And yet another group treats of the supernatural, the thaumaturgical, the mystical, the alchemical, the impossible. To this class belongs, I think, the most astonishing work that the author accomplished, and much the most extraordinary that was ever done upon the same subjects by any European writer. Two of these books deal with the subject of an elixir of life,—that is to say, a medicine by the use of which a man could prolong his existence for hundreds of years; and the titles are "Zanoni" and "A Strange Story." But "A Strange Story" is incomparably the greatest book; and the subject includes much more than the elixir of life; it includes almost every weird and terrible imagination of magic and magical power, of alchemy and Rosicrucianism, of mesmerism and double personality. The hero is a man of society; and the effect of the whole story is made more powerful by the fact that all the scenes are of to-day. The chief figure is a man who lived for five or six hundred years, but who has been able by secret arts to remain continually young, changing his name every fifty or sixty years, so as to conceal his real personality, speaking all languages, and utilizing all sciences, having power of life and death over

his fellow-men, and using it for his own interests only, capable of enormous crime without remorse, and feeling no sympathy with the humanity to which he has made himself strangely superior. No more terrible story ever was written; and it is written with an art that makes it appear not only possible but actual. In order to have written it, enormous reading was necessary, as well as enormous talent. There is scarcely any remarkable superstition of the middle ages, of the Orient, or of ancient Scandinavia, which has not been utilized in the preparation of the book. Many readers, even highly educated men, were taught by this book to feel an interest in matters that they had never heard of before, such as the *Scin-Laeca*, or luminous ghost, of old northern fancy. Yet it is not so much in the actual learning which the story displays, as in the marvellous combinations of that learning, that the writer's art is displayed. You ought, all of you, to read this particular story, even if you read no other book of Bulwer's; for to read it is like an education in the supernatural. I shall mention only one other title of this last group, "The Coming Race." This little book is known in Japan, and I need not tell you much about it. But I want to say that at the time it was written, many of the electric and magnetic discoveries imagined in the story, had not yet been made. They have been made since, and the book was like a prophecy of scientific discovery. Take for instance the art of electric lighting, and compare the resulting facts with the description of the Vril lights in "The Coming Race." Bulwer was not a shallow thinker; and it is not rash to assume that some others of his imaginations may be realized in a future day. An application of electricity to war purposes, as indicated in "The Coming Race," would, if realized, be the end of all war in this world, and perhaps that would be a very good thing for mankind.

But I am not yet done with the subject of the supernatural as treated by Bulwer. One of his short stories is generally acknowledged to be the greatest ghost story that

was ever written, and perhaps it is an even more wonderful thing than "A Strange Story." I mean the little story called first "The House and the Brains," but afterwards called "The Haunted and the Haunters." By this little story Bulwer is attached for all time to the highest literature, as it has become a classic.

There is another story, a very short story, by Bulwer, which has a most interesting history; for it may be said to have indirectly influenced the literature of half the English world. First I will mention my own experience of the story. I read it when a boy in some magazine; there was no name attached to it, and I supposed that it had been written by Edgar Poe. For many years this mistake continued in my mind; unfortunately it had been confirmed by the opinion of a man wiser than I, who had said to me that "Monos and Daimonos" was certainly written by Edgar Poe. It has indeed all of Poe's peculiarities, every one of them. But as a matter of fact it was written by Bulwer, and may be found in his volume entitled "Conversations with an Ambitious Student"—in most editions I think you will find this bound up with "The Pilgrims of the Rhine." Now Poe read the story while very young, and it changed his whole life. All his prose work afterwards was written in imitation of it or under its influence. The influence of Poe in turn affected nearly all English poetry and a great deal of English prose—besides influencing also French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Russian literature. Thus you can see how much even one little story may accomplish. In Bulwer's case it indirectly toned all European literature. If for no other reason, you should read it; it is a little story about a ghost and an evil conscience. What I have told you about it cannot, however, give you the least idea of how extraordinary it is.

It is now time to talk about Bulwer's style. The ornamental and rhetorical style, the highly coloured and musical style, in short the romantic style, reached its highest in him. No man before or since wrote in just the same

splendid way. After him the tendency became simple again. At one time Bulwer's English was studied in thousands of colleges as a model style; it was used in elocution clubs; it was recited at all literary entertainments. Now there is feeling against it. It is called extravagant, theatrical, melodramatic, and many other bad names. But this is unjust, and I think it is owing chiefly to the bad taste of our time. I will say that Bulwer's English is very beautiful, often very wonderful, and that if his books are not now read so much as they used to be, it is only because they have other defects than defects of style. Bulwer's characters are not living characters in the true sense. They are not even living characters in the sense that many of Scott's characters are. But it is otherwise when Bulwer writes about the supernatural, the ghostly, the impossible; then his work becomes as living or real as any work of the kind can be, and it is for that reason that I expressly advise you to read the supernatural books. But even in the other books, the style is always very remarkable, and it is an education to read such pages as those describing the eruption of the volcano in "The Last Days of Pompeii," or the descriptions of Rome and Roman life in "Rienzi," or the description of Venice in "Zanoni." Do not believe critics who tell you that Bulwer's style is not worth study. It is style of a particular class, indeed; but it is the best of that class in the whole of English novel writing. As for his rank merely as a novelist, I should say that he wrote too much, and that he never reached the highest rank except in his short stories and in his astonishing "Strange Story."

Contemporary with him lived and worked the greatest of all English novelists, the very giant of the art of novel writing, Thackeray. Giant in power, not in bulk of work; for he wrote less than half of what Bulwer wrote,—only seven or eight novels. But these novels are incomparably greater than those of Dickens or Bulwer or even Scott, and are approached by no work of the century except that of Jane Austen. Thackeray was not born in England but in

India—at Calcutta, in the year 1811. It is a curious thing that the greatest English novelist of the nineteenth century was born at Calcutta; and that the greatest English songwriter and story-teller of the present day was born at Bombay, somewhat more than half a century later. I think it is probable that in the twentieth century it will be acknowledged that the two greatest English men of letters of our own age were both born in India. Another queer fact is that both have much the same quality of dramatic art, that they see life in the same vivid way, and that they both excel in a kind of satirical poetry, half pathetic and half mocking, but always of a unique and unparalleled kind. Thackeray was educated in England, and studied at Cambridge. He came of a very good family, and could have taken a high place in London society, but he was poor, and wrote only to live. His first ambition was to be a comic artist, a caricaturist, and he was certainly clever in this kind of drawing. But he was not clever enough to win a high position and to make a good salary at this sort of work; therefore he suddenly changed his plans, and took to writing. At first he tried to write comical or satirical things chiefly, in verse and prose, for "Punch" and other papers. But gradually he worked into serious writing, and his first great novel, "Vanity Fair"—with a title suggested by Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress"—startled the literary world. But it was really too great to become at once popular. Men were then more interested in the brilliant romantic novels of Bulwer, and the eccentric novels of Dickens. Thackeray had to compete against these, and only a giant could have done it. Again and again he put forth astonishing studies of life—"Henry Esmond," "The Virginians," "Pendennis," "The Newcomes." At first he had to do journalistic work for "Punch" and other periodicals, while his reputation was being made; and it was made slowly, because a very great talent cannot be understood quickly by the public. But the reputation came, and Thackeray was acknowledged, even before his death, as the greatest man of

letters. He did not write very much. No man could write very much and do such astonishing work, because work of this class costs too much to the nervous system. I shall speak of this again in a moment; I first want to remark upon Thackeray's versatility. Observe that his great novels are not all of one class. Like Bulwer he could write historical romance, though he did not attempt to go very far into history. "Esmond," "The Virginians," these are historical romances; but they are also in the truest and highest sense novels—treating of realities, and nothing but realities. "Vanity Fair," "Pendennis," "The Newcomes,"—these are novels of society, high society, novels of the gentry, in which the figures mostly belong to the very finest classes, the nobility, the clergy, the military aristocracy. Yet Thackeray could depict, when he wished to, any class of society, and he sometimes amused himself by literary caricatures of the peculiarities of the lowest ranks, especially the peculiarities of the English servant. Such studies you will find in his "Yellowplush Papers." But you must not think that Thackeray caricatured only the poor and spared the rich. Quite the contrary. No man has satirized more terribly what we may call the "genteel vulgarity" of the English upper classes, that vulgarity of selfishness and conceit that may even make a lord at times less of a gentleman than his servant. In "The Book of Snobs" Thackeray treated such vulgarity as it never had been treated before, and in all his novels he never spares the faults of men in high places. Besides this work Thackeray did many light things, comic poetry, sketches of travel, lectures upon historical and literary subjects. There is very little of his poetry; but what there is may be classed with the very best kind of that "society-verse" about which I shall give you a lecture. It is full of kind mischief and half-suppressed tenderness, a delightful mixture of the cynical with the emotional. This same delicate double tone qualifies a great deal of his literary work, even his travel sketches. There are two bits of verse by him of which you ought to re-

member the names. One is "The Sorrows of Werther"—this is perhaps a little cruel—and "The Ballad of Bouillabaisse," which is a masterpiece of mixed humour and pathos. Besides, I may mention some purely comic verses, half satirical, painting certain types of character. Such are the "Ballads of Policeman X." In England you must know that the police are numbered in divisions, each division having for sign a letter of the alphabet; thus, if you see on a policeman's uniform the letters A132, or B200, that means that the man is ranked as No. 132 in Division A., or No. 200 in Division B. English police are largely drawn from the country classes, men of great strength and honesty being required, and they have some peculiarities of character and manner which Thackeray amused himself by celebrating in verse. But outside of his novels, his most remarkable literary work consists of lectures. No other lectures can well be compared with those except the lectures of Froude, and Thackeray is even superior to Froude. There are two volumes of lectures, one upon the literary men of the eighteenth century, and one upon four English kings, "The Four Georges." These are very wonderful, and anybody who reads "The Four Georges" must regret that Thackeray never had the time or the inclination to write a history of England. He died comparatively young, leaving a novel unfinished.

What distinguishes Thackeray's work from all other novel writing of the century, except Miss Austen's, is the same quality that distinguishes Shakespeare's characters in English drama. They are really alive, and to make a character really alive is the greatest feat of which human genius is capable. But, as I told you before, it costs. In order to make your characters live, you must actually put so much of your own life into them; they can live only at your expense. The man who has a perfect imagination must exhaust his nervous system very quickly through the exercise of his prodigious faculty. How this happens I cannot very well explain to you without going into a study of

physiology, which would take too much time. But the fact is scientifically recognized and explained; and it is because of this fact that Thackeray has given us only seven or eight novels, while other men were writing twenty-five or thirty. Perfection is too expensive to the life of the man that is capable of it. Even Shakespeare, you will remember, died at a comparatively early age.