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I The Persistence of Realism

Most people in this world seem to live 'in character'; they have a beginning, a middle and an end, and the three are congruous with one another and true to the rules of their type. *You can speak of them as being this sort of people or that.* They are ... no more (and no less) than 'character actors'. They have a class, they have a place, they know what is becoming in them and what is due to them. (Wells 1978, 9, my emphasis)

She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or that. She felt very young, at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking in ... She knew nothing; no language, no history ... and *she would not say* of Peter, she would not say of herself, *I am this, I am that.* (Woolf 1992b, 8–9, my emphasis)

In the juxtaposition of the above quotations from H. G. Wells and Virginia Woolf there is an interesting point of comparison as well as one of contrast. George Ponderevo, speaker of the Wells passage, believes in the possibility of simple characterization in the first lines of the novel, though he goes on to except himself from the rule of pinning a person down in a phrase. His experience has been different from the common run of folk, and so his character and his points of view are more valuable, at least in his opinion. Woolf's Mrs Dalloway who focalizes the second quotation is apparently more generous: she would not say of *any one* now that they could be summed up in a single phrase; she would not say it of Peter, and she would not say of it herself. Later in the novel, however, she would quite precisely sum up in simple phrases the characters she does not like – Miss Kilman (whose very name is a summing up of misanthropy and whose appearance is an indictment of her character), Sir William Bradshaw ('Richard agreed with her ... "didn't like his taste, didn't like his smell"' [Woolf 1992b, 201]), and Lady Bruton (also *brutally* defined by a name). And even Peter Walsh is caricatured in his repeated gesture of playing with his

penknife, a gesture that speaks volumes for post-Freudian readers about violence and sexuality barely repressed by a veneer of civilization.

Character is often called the lifeblood of fiction. In 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' indeed, Woolf quotes Arnold Bennett to the effect that 'The foundation of good fiction is character creating and nothing else' (Bennett qtd in Woolf 1992a, 69). And as I have argued elsewhere, character is a term that has to do with writing and representation at least as much as with the lived experiences of real people. Character is stamped through the individual like lettering in a stick of rock. The word 'character' proposes a human being who is stable and consistent, and who is therefore knowable. The word is used to describe figures in literature precisely because it implies that written personalities are 'easily read', just as character in its meaning of the letters of the alphabet are also to be easily read (Robbins 1996, 112). The conventions for reading character inherited from the great tradition of Victorian fiction were also easily understood. You could judge character by results. Or, in a more subtle formulation from Henry James: 'What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?' (James 1962, 34). Characters are known by their deeds, and can be judged thereby. Or, again, characters can be known by their surroundings, their clothing, their tastes, their socio-economic positions, and other such external things. For William James, brother of novelist Henry and pre-Freudian psychologist, it was common sense that there was continuity between the external objects of a man's life and the internal life he led (James I 1950, 291–2). And this view was commonplace in fiction too, at least until the Modernists began to question the materialist basis of human existence. The questioning, however, did not entirely do away with the fact that psychology and sociology are related disciplines and their effects are felt in related ways, whether by real people or by characters in fiction.

What I want to describe here is the persistence of the conventions and proprieties of realism from the Victorian age to the Edwardian one and beyond. In a realist world view, certain propositions are taken for granted as the basis of the fictional universe they are used to recreate – and by extension, they claim to recreate the fictional universe in the image of the real universe. At its most basic, realism involves the following claims:

- 1 The world is a knowable place, rationally constructed along Newtonian lines of cause and effect; consequently the world – whether fictional or real – is susceptible to totalizing explanations that can be provided through the narrative process.

- 2 Narrative therefore produces patterns (as we saw in the Introduction with Forster's concepts of 'pattern' and 'rhythm') which enable the reader to understand the world as 'designed' and give us the capacity to make sense of a world which might otherwise appear purely random or contingent. Reality may be complicated, but it is not beyond explanation.
- 3 A narrative that makes sense of the world makes it possible for readers to judge the world. In other words, the sense of patterning gives a sense of perspective, a feeling of secure ground from which we are able to form logical opinions.
- 4 Characters within realist fictions are, like the world they inhabit, 'knowable'. They are formed by diverse influences, including – in some versions – heredity, environment and education or upbringing, as well as whatever innate temperament or personality they have at birth. They behave therefore in broadly predictable ways. Their personalities determine what they will do in given circumstances; and by extension, circumstances will determine what a given character is able to do, or imagine doing, as in the quotation from Henry James (James 1962, 34).
- 5 The social world matters intensely to characters in realist fictions as it does to real people. The place occupied by a character in the world is of the greatest importance in formulating what that character is and what s/he can become. Birth, education, and experience make character what it is; and since most people also believe that these things are true in real life too, continuity between reality and fiction is imaginatively constructed by realist fiction. This continuity can result in empathetic identification with characters within the fictional world: the reader is asked to consider what s/he would do in the same circumstances, for example. To this extent, although character represents individuality, it must not be extraordinarily eccentric because it also is heavily invested with the limitations of the type. If characters do not behave typically, readers can learn nothing from their representation.
- 6 As is proper to a mode that really came to fruition in the mid-nineteenth century, the notion of clear patterning (or seeing the world clearly) is mirrored in the realist text's form (it tells about the world 'in a clear way'). Narrative is transparent and draws little attention to itself, requiring readers to forget that they are 'only reading a story'.

These propositions involve the reader in a complex negotiation with the text. On the one hand, judgement is demanded by a mode

that sees the world clearly and sees it whole; on the other, empathy and identification might well cloud clear vision. It is that complexity of response that anti-realist criticism perhaps dismisses. Much has been written about realism – and the pages of late-nineteenth-century journals are filled with commentaries, both negative and positive about its aesthetic value. I am not using the term here in quite the way the Victorians and Edwardians might have done because I want to use it as a neutrally descriptive term that tells us something about fiction written under its aegis, not as a term of value judgement, which was the inescapable focus of much nineteenth-century commentary. I want to reclaim the word as a useful term that properly describes some of the important writings of the transitional phase between the Victorians and the Modernists.

In *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, Raymond Williams suggests that 1895 is a key date for British literature. Williams focuses on Thomas Hardy's publication in that year of *Jude the Obscure* to a torrent of critical abuse, to the extent that Hardy gave up writing fiction in favour of poetry, and thus an era of Victorian fiction came to an end. But whilst Williams sees that there is a cut-off point in 1895, he also argues that there was a central continuity from Hardy to Lawrence, a continuity, that is, between the broadly realist tradition in which Hardy wrote, and the qualified Modernist aesthetics of Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915). Conventional literary history, however, often implies that between Hardy's last fiction and Lawrence's first major novel, *Sons and Lovers* (1913), 'there is in effect ... a missing generation' (Williams 1984, 119). There are of course names that belong to that generation; it is the period of 'James and Conrad; the early novels of Forster; and then of course that composite figure H. G. A. J. Wells–Bennett–Galsworthy' (120). Williams's point is that the privileged position given to the writers broadly understood as Modernist writers – Conrad, Joyce, Woolf, Mansfield, and with heavy qualifications, Lawrence and Forster – by the mainstream of the critical academy, has tended to obliterate the other broadly realist tradition of fiction writing in the period. He identifies the central opposition between the two traditions as an emphasis on "individual" or "psychological" fiction on the one hand and "social" or "sociological" fiction on the other' (119–20).

What this chapter seeks to suggest is that this opposition is based on a misunderstanding of how the writers in the less privileged position in that binary opposition – the realists – set out to compose their fiction. Where Woolf was sure that the future of fiction lay in excavating 'the dark places of psychology', and that psychology was largely an

internal and individual matter, Wells–Bennett–Galsworthy amongst others understood psychology as being at least in part externally constructed, by circumstance and material conditions as much as by essence or innate personality. While Virginia Woolf had said that ‘in or about December 1910 human character changed’ (Woolf 1992a, 70), nevertheless in the same essay she takes for granted that one would naturally have servants. Change was only *visible* if one was privileged. Unlike Woolf, H. G. Wells was only too aware that character was constituted by material and cultural circumstances. His mother had been a housekeeper on a country estate, and Wells knew that the life of the servant class was not all sweetness and light even after the turn of the century, making great play in *Kipps* (1905) of the fact that even modern houses were not built for the convenience of those who did the hard labour of running them. Kipps’s wife Ann, who has been in service, announces as they hunt for their first home that they must not have a house with a basement kitchen: ‘[A basement] is a downstairs where there’s not ’arf enough light and everything has got to be carried – up and down, up and down, all day – coals and everything. And [our house has] got to ’ave a water-tap and sink and things upstairs. You’d ’ardly believe, Artie, if you ’adn’t been in service, ’ow cruel and silly some ’ouses are built’ (Wells 1993a, 246). Wells’s narrator treats Kipps and his wife with amused patronage, commenting that the home they seek exists only in ‘dreamland or 1975 A.D.’ (254). Nonetheless, he is making an important comment about the ways in which material existence significantly determines the kind of spiritual and emotional life it is possible to have. The limitations of Kipps are not simply temperamental or personal. They are a function of the limited life that has been available to him. Now, whilst I am sure that Woolf would have treated her servants well, the calm assumption that her readers have servants implies that she did not really *see* the life she is so blasé about, as H. G. Wells, whatever his limitations, did.

Woolf’s major fictions are all resolutely set in the very comfortable world of the upper middle classes; her characters are people who have choices because they are not involved in hard material struggles for bare subsistence. Compare and contrast the world view of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) with that of Arthur Morrison’s *A Child of the Jago* (1896) looks like the kind of examination question that will never be set. Apart from the obviously galvanizing effects of the First World War for Woolf’s novel, however, these two texts came to being in wholly different worlds – and the main substance of the differences between them is not historical as such, but is to do with the sociological arenas

in which they are each set: the Ramsays are privileged; the Perrotts are not. In William James's terms, understanding personality through ownership, the Ramsays have characters that match their possessions, and the Perrotts do not. This is not to say that only brute existence is possible in the Jago. The child Dicky Perrott is capable of affection and love, nursing his baby sister to sleep in an early chapter of the novel (Morrison 1996, 15). He is willing to be a 'good' boy, in the right circumstances. But the right circumstances never arise. He cannot keep an honest job; he is surrounded by criminality and violence and the only moral lesson he can take from his surroundings is that the biggest villains get the biggest rewards: 'Straight people's fools, *I* reckon,' he tells his mother. 'Kidido Cook says that, an' 'e's as wide as Broad Street. W'en I grow up I'm goin' to git toffs' clo'es an' be in the 'igh mob. They does big clicks' (16).¹ His only possible ambition is to join the aristocracy of crime (the high mob) and to participate in lucrative theft (big clicks). Dicky's story is about a struggle against overwhelming odds, a battle with material circumstances that he cannot win. In the world of the Jago, a fictionalized version of the worst parts of the East End, casual violence is a way of life, and of death, and Dicky dies its victim, despite the potential he displays for a more fully human existence.

Casual violence also kills Andrew Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, of course. His death is announced parenthetically: '[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]' (Woolf 1992c, 145). But the point about Andrew Ramsay's death is that it is a long way outside his ordinary experience, rather than part of it, whereas Dicky's death, stabbed in a Jago fight, following hard on the heels of his father's hanging for murder, expresses a whole way of life rather than an exceptional aberration in it. The fact that Dicky is scarcely educated and fundamentally inarticulate does not mean that he has no potential or that his psychological make-up is insignificant, merely that it is clearly not the most significant thing about him.

Morrison of course deliberately sets out to invoke pathos for political ends. His writing has a palpable design on the reader, as he comments in the Preface he wrote to the third edition in 1897:

[My critics] claim that if I write of the Jago I should do so 'even weeping' ... The cant of the charge stares all too plainly from the face of it. It is not that these good people wish me to write 'even weeping'; for how do they know whether I weep or not? No; their wish is, not that I shall weep, but that I shall do their weeping for them ... that I shall make public

parade of sympathy on their behalf, so that they may keep their own sympathy for themselves, and win comfort from their belief that they are eased of their just responsibility by vicarious snivelling. (Morrison 1996, 7)

His purpose, in other words, is to insist that ‘just responsibility’ for the conditions of the Jago is everyone’s concern and their reform is everyone’s business. *A Child of the Jago*, like a number of the fictions produced in the late nineteenth century dealing with the Condition of England in the 1880s and 1890s,² is designed as a call to action. If Dicky and Josh provoke sympathy, they should also provoke the will to do something about the abysmal conditions which produced their wasted lives. This is a profoundly ‘Victorian’ view of the purpose of fiction – that it should teach us, or exhort us, to lead better lives. It is also one of the key motivations of realist writing. This view of the purpose of fiction was roundly rejected as a basis for literature by writers like Virginia Woolf. Commenting on D. H. Lawrence’s *Letters* in her diary, she wrote, ‘Art is being rid of all preaching things’ (Woolf 1997, 326), and she regarded any form of didacticism as aesthetic failure. This, though, is a world view that depends on being in a particular comfort zone; what is wrong with Woolf’s position is that it argues for a very narrow way of seeing, a way of seeing that refuses to follow through the implications of the fact that the world at large has very specific effects on the individual psyche. As Edwin Reardon, the failed novelist of George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891) puts it in conversation with his wife:

The difference ... between a man with money and the man without is simply this: the one thinks, ‘How shall I use my life?’ and the other, ‘How shall I keep myself alive?’ A physiologist ought to be able to discover some curious distinction between the brain of a person who has never given a moment’s thought to the means of subsistence, and that of one who has never known a day free from such cares. (Gissing 1985, 232)

One way of thinking about divisions in serious fiction in the forty years around the turn of the twentieth century is in terms of this distinction: there is a kind of psychology available to the ‘haves’ that is not available to the ‘have-nots’. With relatively few exceptions, we could categorize almost all the writers of this period according to whether they present characters who are concerned with subsistence as opposed to those who are concerned with Spiritual Existence or Life Itself (the capitals are part of the rhetoric).

To put it another way, there is a clear class bias in the insistence that psychological fiction involving the excavation of deep motivations for human actions is somehow 'better' than sociological fictions which consider material life as an essential part of the formation of character. This bias has many different roots and explanations. One is the rise of mass literacy. Q. D. Leavis's wonderfully snobbish (yet extremely informative) *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) surveys the field of published fiction at the beginning of the twentieth century with mounting dismay at the abysmal taste of the public and at readers' contentment with poor product. Leavis identifies mass literacy as a major contributor to a literary culture in which bad writing is far more successful than good (Leavis 1990, 3). The tone of her critique, and especially her view that the English literary novel has no potential market represents, coming as it does from a representative of the literary-critical establishment, in part explains why the complex psychological fiction of Modernism has been preferred by university departments over the social fictions and the pulp fictions that were far more popular in their own time. Mass market fiction – the bestseller – is characterized by escapism (readers choose it 'to obtain vicarious satisfaction or compensation for life' [48]). The closer relationship between public demand and product in the literary market-place of the nineteenth century had an appalling effect on the quality of the product, Leavis argues. Thus, where Matthew Arnold, writing in the 1850s, had been convinced that a literary education would 'tend to elevate and humanize' the populace, and consecrate an elite culture at the centre of British life (Arnold in Sandford 1889, 19), Leavis feared a very different effect. Her book is peppered with references to reading light fiction as an equivalent to drug addiction and drunkenness, and she comments consistently on the demoralizing effect of popular writing, even amongst those sections of society who should know better:

It is relevant to note ... that the author of detective novels consulted receives [fan] letters chiefly from 'school-boys, scientific men, clergymen, lawyers, and business men generally,' and adds 'I think I am read more by the upper classes than the lower classes, and by men more than women.' The social orders named here as forming the backbone of the detective-story public are those who in the last century would have been the guardians of the public conscience in the matter of mental self-indulgence. (Leavis 1990, 51)

These anxieties tended to promote a literary-critical tradition that valued difficulty and complexity over simplicity, and the inner life

expressed in ambiguous ways over the external life, or any kind of escapist fantasy, clearly stated in plain language. Far too many people, Leavis argues, ‘admit to reading indiscriminately and rarely if ever re-reading’ (51). Too many people do no ‘serious’ reading at all, and are even disdainful of anything difficult, which they dismiss as ‘highbrow’. This state of affairs is a disgrace.

Wells’s *Kipps*, however, takes a very different line. Kipps escapes a desperately narrow life, memorably described by a fellow apprentice as a ‘life in a blessed drainpipe, and we’ve got to crawl along it till we die’ (Wells 1993a, 34) via that staple of pulp fictions, an unexpected inheritance. His life up till this point has left him ill-educated, emotionally immature and virtually inarticulate. Newly flushed with fortune but embarrassed by his lack of cultured manners, Kipps attempts to acquire educated polish; he is taken under the wing of Chester Coote. Coote – as his name clearly implies – is pretentious and ridiculous, though Kipps does not know this at first. He takes his mentor’s advice on proper conversation, manners and dress, and attempts to follow a course of reading set out for him by his new-found friend. Before sending him off to read ‘(1) [Ruskin’s] *Sesame and Lilies*, (2) *Sir George Tressady* [and] (3) an anonymous book on “Vitality” that Coote particularly esteemed’ (133), Coote has advised his protégé about the ‘virtue in books’ (130):

Nothing enlarges the mind [...] like Travel and Books...And they’re both so easy nowadays and so cheap! [...] You’d hardly believe [...] how much you can get out of books. Provided you avoid trashy reading, that is. You ought to make a rule, Kipps, and read one Serious Book a week. Of course we can Learn even from Novels, Nace Novels that is, but it isn’t the same as serious reading. I made a rule, One Serious Book and One Novel – no more. There’s some of the Serious books I’ve been reading lately – on that table: *Sartor Resartus*, Mrs Twaddletome’s *Pond Life*, *The Scottish Chiefs*, *Life and Letters of Dean Ferrar*. (Wells 1993a, 131, my ellipses in square brackets)

Coote borrows the authority that Q. D. Leavis took for granted, on rather less basis. He has no right to advise Kipps, being extremely ignorant himself – as Wells’s rather heavy-handed satire testifies (Mrs Twaddletome’s *Pond Life* speaks many more such volumes in Coote’s library). In his struggles with Ruskin and with a book on etiquette, Kipps becomes utterly miserable. All he learns is how to behave like an affected snob – a lesson we can pick up immediately from Coote’s exaggerated pronunciation of ‘Nace Novels’ and his unwarranted capitalization of words in

speech to make the sound all the more impressive, hence my comment about *Life and Existence* earlier.

Ironic, then, that Kipps finds true happiness at the end of the novel as a bookseller who scarcely knows his own product except as goods to sell. Books are, for Kipps, mere commodities to read just the once, which is the reason that they are also a reasonable commercial proposition; if one does not re-read, there is a built-in obsolescence in fiction that guarantees ongoing sales. He does not need to read to know that and Wells has some fun in the last paragraphs of the novel with the idea that Kipps is unwittingly selling his own life story as a bookseller in Hythe.

Bearing in mind the social history of the mass expansion of education after 1870, and also the fact that realist modes of writing are both reflections of a world and re-creations of it, underlying much of what I want to say about George Gissing and the triumvirate of Edwardians – Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett – is the question of literacy and its effects. Realist fictions very often make great play of the books that characters within them have read: what someone reads tells us as much about them as what they wear or what they put in their houses, and authors perhaps like the idea that books have real influence on real people. There is a degree of self-reflexivity about the turn-of-the-century novelists' evocations of reality, and which is evidence of a kind of sophistication in their work which is too often dismissed by those who wish to hurry on to read Woolf or Joyce. I want to suggest a 'way of seeing' the history of literary fiction that takes proper account of some of the writers who focused their attention on the social formation of character, rather than insisting that psychology bears no relation to sociology. The usual kind of literary history depends on a predetermined set of aesthetic values – values which are indeed anti-Victorian, but not necessarily the better for all that. They are values which make it difficult to produce a proper estimation of the fictions of, say, George Gissing and the composite figure of 'Wells–Bennett–Galsworthy'.

The strained case of George Gissing

George Gissing (1857–1903) was born in Wakefield to comfortable middle-class parents, but his father died when Gissing was only thirteen years old. Thereafter, his education was financed by scholarships and academic prizes won on the basis of his intellectual brilliance. After an education at a minor provincial public school, he went to

Owens College, Manchester. His academic career – extremely promising at the outset – was cut short in 1876 after he was imprisoned and disgraced for stealing money to help reform a prostitute, Nell Harrison, who had engaged his interest. He believed that all Nell lacked for making a successful life was opportunity, and, ‘he was not able to believe something without acting upon it, immediately, consistently and wholeheartedly’ (Schafer in Michaux 1981, 51). After prison, he went to the United States, living (though only just) by tutoring and occasional journalism. Having nearly starved in America, and having considered suicide by throwing himself into the Niagara Falls – both of which motifs recur in his fiction – he returned to England in 1877 to make a career as a man of letters. But on his return, he also married Nell. She failed to ‘reform’, becoming a confirmed alcoholic and occasional prostitute to serve her addiction. Gissing’s domestic life was anything but settled and respectable, and although he lived for long periods separately from his wife, he continued to support her out of his relatively meagre earnings until her death in 1888. Gissing then proceeded to make the same mistake again, marrying for a second time a girl of working-class origins, Edith Underwood, in 1891. Edith bore him two children, but was incapable of running his house, apparently had a violent temper (she was eventually institutionalized for insanity in 1902), and was utterly unsuited to the kind of domesticity Gissing – a true middle-class Victorian at heart – craved and idealized.

In ‘Gissing’s Feminine Portraiture’ (1963), Pierre Coustillas has argued that Gissing’s aesthetic vision was a double vision. Coustillas surveys the whole field of Gissing’s work, concluding that the novelist’s views of women are complex because they are enmeshed in the double vision of femininity that he had inherited from the Victorians: ‘Gissing’s feelings towards woman lie between two poles: on the one hand, intense admiration of sensual origin, an irrepressible aspiration for absolute happiness... on the other hand, cynicism and a barely contained craving for violence’ (Coustillas in Michaux 1981, 100). The idealism about femininity, and his disgust with any woman who fails to live up to that ideal is symptomatic of the whole of Gissing’s writing life. In the same spirit, many of his fictions are what might be called ‘sociological fictions’; texts such as *The Unclassed* (1884), *Demos* (1886) and *The Nether World* (1889), deal with the lives of the urban poor. There is a will to idealize the poor, and at the same time, a cynicism about improving their conditions, based on the fear that they are perhaps ineducable. Characters who have ideals – for example, Sidney Kirkwood in *The Nether World* – are ground down by circumstance,

and forced to give up even their limited visions of a better life. In dealing with the poor, as with women (though the two groups are not, of course mutually exclusive), Gissing is constantly torn between sympathy and contempt. His vision is strained by the contradiction between idealization and realization, and between the belief in personal vision and the practical considerations that might stand in the way of their realization. Consequently, contemporary reviewers were often perplexed by Gissing's fiction. In a review of *The Nether World* written for the *Contemporary Review* in September 1889, F. W. Ferrar asked rhetorically: 'What is the object ... of painting such scenes, such characters – such conditions of society and human life reduced to its barest blankest elements of spiritual death, or moral atrophy, of physical degradation?' (Coustillas and Partridge 1972, 144). He concluded that as the novel did 'little or nothing to impress upon us as to the nature of the remedy' (145), it did not fulfil the requirements of such representation. It provided no message, and offered no solution.

In few places is this more apparent than in *New Grub Street* (1891), a novel which veers between unrelieved social realism (most of the reviewers protested against its pessimism [see Coustillas and Partridge 1972]) and defeated idealism. Moreover, it is usually read – with real justification – as a text that has much to tell us about the history of book-writing and publishing, rather than as a novel with much in the way of intrinsic value. As P. J. Keating has suggested, 'First and foremost [*New Grub Street*] is a sociological document; a sociological document of genius written in the form of a novel' (Keating 1968, 9). And, indeed, part of its purpose is to provide an anatomy of literary London, a discussion and description of literature as a business, an industry even, and a market. As such, it represents a number of Q. D. Leavis's views about the dangers of a mass market for literature in fictional form, whilst pointing out that even artistic vision is necessarily constrained by the material practices of literary production. Jasper Milvain, the novel's 'villain' and a successful man of letters, argues passionately that literature is just a business like any other business, and has to be dealt with in the same way (Gissing 1985, 39). Jasper then proceeds to live by the practice he preaches. He has a certain contempt for his audience, whom he identifies as 'the people who like to feel that what they are reading has some special cleverness, but who can't distinguish between stones and paste' (43–4), and he recognizes the limitations of his own talent, realizing that he is incapable of writing a great novel, for example. Not only does he develop an acute sense of business in terms of his own literary products, he also sets his sisters to

work on writing for the highly lucrative (and utterly unchallenging) market of fiction for Sunday-School Prize books, advising them: ‘Get together half a dozen fair specimens of the Sunday-school prize; study them; discover the essential points of such composition; hit upon new attractions; then go to work methodically, so many pages a day’ (43). Such books are written to a formula that anyone should be able to discover, and there is a ready market for them. There is no point in awaiting divine inspiration. Writing works of this kind is just a job like any other, requiring a certain amount of training and application, and nothing else.

What the novel proposes throughout is that those who treat writing as a business will succeed. The comic figure of Whelpdale whose own fiction has consistently been rejected by publishers eventually sets himself up in business as a ‘literary adviser’. ‘Now that’s one of the finest jokes I ever heard. A man who can’t get anyone to publish his own books,’ says Milvain, ‘makes a living by telling other people how to write!’ (195). Once begun as an entrepreneur, Whelpdale truly becomes successful in journalism, helping to found a magazine named *Chit-chat* (a thinly veiled parody of George Newnes’s *Tit-Bits*, founded in 1881). Describing his venture to Jasper and Dora, he says:

I would have the paper address itself to the quarter-educated; that is to say, the great new generation of that is being turned out by the Board schools, the young men and women who can just read, but are incapable of sustained attention. People of this kind want something to occupy them in trains, and on buses and trams. As a rule they care for no newspapers but Sunday ones; what they want is the lightest and frothiest of chit-chatty information – bits of stories, bits of description, bits of scandal, bits of jokes, bits of statistics, bits of foolery. . . . Everything must be very short, two inches at the utmost; their attention can’t sustain itself beyond two inches. Even chat is too solid for them: they want chit-chat. (Gissing 1985, 496–7)

This incident rehearses in fictional form the argument made by Q. D. Leavis in *Fiction and the Reading Public*. As Dora comments, ‘Surely these poor silly people oughtn’t to be encouraged in their weakness’ (497); lowly journalism is not what the ideal of mass education had been for. But whereas Leavis is outraged by the creation of a new literary market on the basis of the newly educated masses – the result of the Forster Education Act of 1870, who were first coming to maturity in the early 1880s when New Grub Street is set – Whelpdale, supported by Jasper, sees nothing here but a business opportunity. Whelpdale,

signalled by his ridiculous name, is a Dickensian caricature who is treated with amused tolerance; at least in this world of the bottom line, he will be able to support his wife through peddling his trashy magazine. He is redeemed by the genuine love and admiration he feels for Dora, whereas Milvain is the object of a more sustained satire of moral outrage. In part this is justified by Gissing's creation of Jasper as a man not averse to 'caddishness'. He treats Marian Yule extremely badly, primarily because it turns out that her inheritance (significantly derived from the manufacture of paper) is not adequate to his wants. But Jasper's real sin is his cynically clear vision about the nature of literary business, and his ability to adapt to the market, making no pretence of literary idealism, and focussing entirely on the cash nexus. Milvain marries Amy Reardon at the end of the novel, and Gissing clearly presents this final marriage of the text as a marriage of true minds. Amy is Jasper's equal in practical materialism: they deserve each other.

Milvain, however, is at least extremely self aware. He knows – and admits to others – that the necessity of earning a living will lead him into a degree of selfishness of which he is not proud. 'Selfishness – that's one of my faults. It isn't a brutal kind of selfishness; [but] the thought of it often troubles me. If I were rich, I should be a generous and good man,' he tells Marian in words that are not so very dissimilar to those of Edwin Reardon quoted above (149). He recognizes that his personality is the result of material and historical circumstances which form him in a particular mould, and to which he must adapt. That self-awareness is presented by Gissing as part of Milvain's cold-bloodedness, in part because it is part of Gissing's satire to insist that the alleged decline in literary standards is a disgrace, in part because worldly success is something he views with deep ambivalence. The novel loads the dice against readers having any sympathy or admiration for Jasper. As Q. D. Leavis once observed, 'when any nineteenth-century novelist names a character Jasper I think we may safely conclude that that character is intended to be the villain' (Leavis in Michaux 1981, 180). But in reality, the only difference between Milvain and the other characters in the novel is that he makes use of his self-consciousness and energy for material gain, where they allow their characters to form their destinies.

In marked contrast to Milvain's success is the parade of literary failures who populate the rest of the novel. They cover a range of literary aspirations, from Alfred Yule, who writes about severe subjects for the monthly periodicals, and whose ambitions to be an editor have been consistently disappointed, to Harold Biffen, who turns to realist fiction

because there is no outlet in the modern world for him to make his enthusiasm for Greek literature pay. (As it happens, he cannot make realism pay either.) All the literary failures strive hopelessly against the current conditions of the market rather than adapting to them. Biffen, for example, is presented throughout as both marvellous and ineffectual; because he is a very attractive character, his defeat is all the more bitter. Biffen, as Gissing had done before him, scrapes a bare living by tutoring working men in the classics and by economizing on basics like food, whilst attempting to write a novel entitled *Mr Bailey, Grocer*. His project, he tells Edwin Reardon is to produce

an absolute realism in the sphere of the ignobly decent. ... I don't know any writer who has treated ordinary vulgar-life with fidelity and seriousness ... I want to deal with the essentially unheroic, with the day-to-day life of that vast majority of people who are at the mercy of paltry circumstance. ... An instance, now. As I came along ... half an hour ago a man and a girl were walking close in front of me, love-making; I passed them slowly and heard a good deal of their talk ... Now, such a love scene as that has never been written down: it was entirely decent, yet vulgar to the *n*th power ... I am going to reproduce it verbatim, without one single impertinent suggestion of any point of view save that of honest reporting. The result will be something unutterably tedious. Precisely. That is the stamp of the ignobly decent life. If it were anything *but* tedious it would be untrue. (Gissing 1985, 174)

He will not order life, or give it patterns and explanations; he will simply see life and record it as it happens. He is not concerned with what Reardon calls 'the *art* of fiction' (176), but only with a faithful copy of life. He will not laugh at misfortunes or make them melodramatic as Dickens had done; nor will he depict them as tragic heroes and heroines, as Zola would. He will merely describe what there is.

For all the severely realist outlook of his work, however, Biffen is a romantic at heart. He performs the only act of (mock) heroism in the novel, when he rescues his manuscript about the Grocer from a house fire; and he dies a suicide just as a romantic hero would – though with more (ignoble) decency to others, dying alone in a park where he can make no mess to inconvenience those who find him. The reasons for his death are complex. From the outset the Reardons and Jasper Milvain have identified him as someone who lives far too close to the edge. 'That poor man will die of starvation some day,' Amy comments to her husband (178). But although his poverty is extreme and his outlook as a 'realist' novelist extremely pessimistic, Biffen's despair and suicide

come about because of misplaced romanticism. In a cynical conversation with Edwin Reardon after Reardon's marriage has broken up, he discusses the ideal of marriage and companionship. Reardon has just suggested that he would have been better off marrying a 'some simple, kind-hearted work-girl' (404) in preference to his middle-class wife. The reader of the novel or of any potted biography of its author, of course, knows that this is a mistaken view. We have Gissing's own marriages and that of Alfred Yule in mind. By the same token Biffen tells Reardon that such a marriage would have been doomed:

the girl would have married you in firm persuasion that you were a 'gentleman' in temporary difficulties, and that before long you would have plenty of money to dispose of. Disappointed in this hope, she would have grown sharp-tempered, querulous, selfish. All your endeavours to make her understand you would only have resulted in widening an impassable gulf. She would have misconstrued your every sentence, found food for suspicion in every harmless joke, tormented you with the vulgarest forms of jealousy. The effect upon your nature would have been degrading. (Gissing 1985, 404–5)

This is not only a remarkably accurate diagnosis of the failure of Alfred Yule's marriage; it is also a very clear, if unconscious, statement of the actual problem of Edwin Reardon's, since although the girl in question, Amy, is middle class, she is materialistic and unsuited to be the wife of an idealistic artist struggling in a garret. Just like the hypothetical working girl, she has also married in the firm persuasion that Edwin Reardon is made for better things.

Biffen admits to having nearly made such a mistake himself, in that he almost married a working girl at some point prior to the opening of *New Grub Street*. Taking a realistic attitude to his poverty and prospects, he never tries to find female companionship again. But in a bout of desperately hopeless affection, he falls romantically in love with Amy Reardon, recognizing despite his infatuation that she will never reciprocate. At the end of his resources – financial resources, but importantly also his emotional resources after he encounters the happily engaged Whelpdale – he goes to the British Library to read about poisons, and kills himself in a park because a life without female affection is 'meaningless' (526). What's striking about the figure of Biffen is that for most of the novel he is a figure from a comedy, a cheerful person who lightens the gloom for other characters, who are always able to enjoy a joke at his good-natured expense. But the genre that surrounds him shifts from comedy to melodrama. He is a very intriguing

instance of Gissing's strained way of seeing, where the idealist always comes a cropper and the good resolutely do not end happily.

Gissing's rendering of Reardon is also ambiguous. He is generally presented as the struggling artist figure, misunderstood by the world and his wife, and buffeted by circumstances. But he is also a petulant child who does not really behave particularly well. And the fact that he has both talent and ideals is hardly an excuse for his high-handed attitudes and utter incapacity to take a more practical line with his life. The world, as he half-acknowledges, does not owe him a living: 'The world has no pity on a man who can't do or produce something it thinks worth money ... For all that, it's hard that I must be kicked aside as useless just because I don't know a trade' (230–1). Reardon persists in seeing writing as vocation rather than as a job. But Reardon is also presented with sympathy. The writer who cannot write and who must fudge to deal with his conditions is – for readers at least – a sympathetic figure. Mrs Carter, Amy's acquaintance, sums up the attitude of reverence that is part of the myth of the artist, approaching his desk on tiptoe to look at the work in progress (166). Moreover, Reardon really is hemmed in by the literary machinery of his age. As a novelist he has to produce work in the format required by publishers, the three-volume novel, described perceptively by Milvain as a 'triple-headed monster, sucking the blood of the English novelist' (235).

The three-volume form had been the major form of publication for fiction since the time of Sir Walter Scott, and the cost to the casual potential buyer of fiction was prohibitive – a three-decker retailed at 31s 6d, whilst even at the end of the century, the average working man earned rather less than 20 shillings a week. Why produce a product that cost more than even quite wealthy buyers could readily afford? The answer was that books were not produced for individual buyers. Publishers counted on selling virtually the entire print-run of their fiction to Circulating Libraries such as Mudie's Select library. Three volumes were more profitable to the libraries because each borrower would pay for the loan of each volume of the text, making a single volume unattractive in comparison. Publishers had a guaranteed market for their fiction, and scarcely needed, therefore, to market their product aggressively. Everyone – except the novelist – won. Novelists, as *New Grub Street* amply demonstrates, made their money from selling the copyright of their texts outright to the publisher. If the book did not prove popular, the author made an unearned profit. If the book was popular, however, and was subsequently reprinted in cheaper

editions for the public to buy, for example at the railway station outlets of W. H. Smith and Sons, the author saw no further profit from his work. In addition, the three-volume form had an effect on *what* got published. Writing in the 1880s, the novelist George Moore was infuriated by the fact that some of his writing had been effectively banned by the libraries because of its sexual content. In his *Literature at Nurse* pamphlet (1885), Moore complained that since Mudie's had to provide fiction that was entirely suitable for a family audience, there was no space for any discussion of sexual or political issues, which were resolutely kept out of Mudie's Select selection.

Furthermore, as Robert Altick describes, the three-volume novel placed a strain on the novel form itself. He comments that 'the exigencies of three-decker publication ... were largely responsible for what some modern readers consider the verbosity, inordinate length, qualitative unevenness, and sometimes sheer formlessness of much Victorian fiction' (Altick 1999, 295). In *New Grub Street*, it is the very fact of how much material must go into a novel that is part of Edwin Reardon's problem. He struggles valiantly to write so many lines per day and gets stuck during his writing of the second volume: 'Messieurs and Mesdames the critics are wont to point out the weakness of second volumes; they are generally right, simply because a story which would have made a tolerable book ... refuses to fill three books' (161). Reardon is reduced to shameless padding: 'He kept as much as possible to dialogue; the space is filled so much more quickly, and at a pinch one can make people talk about the paltriest incidents of life' (154). And the effect of the pressure to write to order has a detrimental effect on his prose: 'He would write a sentence beginning thus: "She took a book with a look of—;" or thus: "A revision of this decision would have made him an object of derision"' (154). Gissing is anxious to represent Reardon's struggles as almost heroic, and he nearly persuades the reader that the disaster of his life is a tragedy.

New Grub Street is, as the anonymous reviewer for *Murray's Magazine* (June, 1891) put it, a text that bears some of the stamp of Harold Biffen's view of ignoble decency, where circumstance and contingency have more effect on outcomes than talent or intention. Gissing would like to suggest that Edwin Reardon, writer of psychological fictions, is the hero. But the ambiguity of his strained vision is better understood as a way of seeing that demands that readers see material conditions and their effects as central to human life, rather than elevating unrealized and unrealizable ideals as the sole focus of fiction.

H. G. Wells and the quarter-educated

H. G. Wells (1866–1946) had two careers as a novelist. In the 1890s, he wrote a series of fictions usually known as scientific romances which are the progenitors of the modern genre of science fiction; they include *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). After 1900, when he published *Love and Mr Lewisham*, his fiction took a more realistic turn. As Robert P. Weeks has observed, however, there is a connection between Wells's science fictions and his stories of contemporary reality. Weeks calls the Time Traveller Wells's paradigmatic character because he is a man who seeks 'to break out of the physical universe' (Weeks 1976, 26). Instead of building his novels around the acute observation of character in environment, 'Wells's protagonists ... look on their environment as a series of barriers that somehow must be broken through' (28). In the science fictions, the breaking through is achieved by individual efforts. The Time Traveller builds his time machine and boldly goes into the future; the Invisible Man discovers the process by which invisibility can be procured and crosses the barrier between seen and unseen in a quasi-Nietzschean attempt to become an *Übermensch*; Dr Moreau seeks to break down the boundaries between species; the Martians invade Earth, overcoming the physical barriers of space. It is no accident that the major protagonists of these fictions are all more or less securely middle class, and all have had a sound scientific education which makes their adventures possible.

In his realist fictions of contemporary life, however, for all the elements of fantasy that persist within them (a convenient inheritance in *Kipps* [1905], the miracle 'cures' of quack medicine in *Tono-Bungay*, the wish-fulfilment fantasy of love in *Ann Veronica* [both 1909], and the miracle of irrepressible enthusiasm in *The History of Mr Polly* [1910], for example), the social positions of the protagonists are much less secure. *Ann Veronica* is middle class, of course, but despite her social status, her education is distinctly lacking and the opportunities mapped out for her by her conventional family are no less claustrophobic than those of *Kipps*, *Polly* or *Ponderevo*. She is a bird in a gilded cage rather than a rat in a drainpipe, but it is a cage nonetheless. The middle-class woman, in other words, shares some of the same disadvantages as the proletarian man. The major difference between them is that she is able to articulate her desires for a different life, and is able in part to persuade her father that he should provide the resources so that her education should continue, options certainly not

open to Kipps or Mr Polly. Nonetheless, in their various ways, each of these characters also seeks to break down barriers, and one of the key ways in which they do so is through achieving the education that Wells's middle-class male protagonists from the scientific romances can take for granted – and which they generally misuse.

What Gissing's Whelpdale called the 'quarter-educated' were very much Wells's concern, not least because he was so nearly one of them himself. Describing his own schooldays in his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) the sources of Arthur Kipps, Alfred Polly and George Ponderevo's education become apparent in Wells's experience. His own headmaster, Mr Morley, 'was ... not of eminent academic attainments; his first prospectus laid stress on "writing in both plain and ornamental style, Arithmetic logically, and History with special reference to Ancient Egypt" ... there was ... great stress on copperplate flourishes, long addition sums and book-keeping' (Wells I, 1984, 85). Wells goes on to describe a school regime in which there was erratic discipline, since the schoolmaster occasionally fell asleep at his desk, a pedagogic method that relied heavily on rote-learning and unpredictable corporal punishment, and very little logic in a curriculum delivered to a classroom full of boys aged between seven and fifteen. Wells is fairer to Morley, however, than he is to Morley's fictional counterparts. The real headmaster might not have been very competent, but he was at least well meaning. Wells's parents had sent him to this school, as Kipps's and Polly's families also do, to avoid sending him to the National Board School, the publicly funded foundations that were the result of the 1870 Education Act. They did so largely on class grounds: the Board Schools were for the poor – and Academies like those of Mr Morley were for 'members of the tenant-farmer, shop-keeper, innkeeper, upper servant stratum' (85). They existed for the purpose of procuring a commercial education for those who would work at the lower end of business. Apart from whatever natural aptitudes he possessed, Wells also insists that the reason his education did not mark him for life (though it produced a cockney accent and a horror of speaking French from which he could never free himself), was that he broke his leg when he was seven, and spent a great deal of his convalescence reading. Q. D. Leavis would perhaps disapprove, but Wells comments quite happily: 'I cannot recall now many of the titles of the books I read, I devoured them so fast, and the title and the author's name in those days seemed a mere inscription on the door to delay me in getting down to business' (77). His consumption of books was indiscriminating, but he does recall voracious excitement over

factual books about foreign places, about biology and natural history, and only later about story books of the adventure genre by Captain Mayne Reid, Fenimore Cooper and ‘the Wild West generally’ (78).

The tolerance with which he looks back on his own education in the autobiography is put aside in the fiction. The school attended by Arthur Kipps is run by a man with a ‘bogus diploma’ (Wells 1993a, 8), and attracts its pupils with a prospectus that is long on polysyllabic words and short on truth and grammar. Kipps remembers his school-days with anything but affection, their only purpose having been to make him understand the value of holidays. Mr Polly is no better off, beginning at the local Board School which was

run on severely economical lines to keep down the rates,³ by a largely untrained staff; he was set sums to do that he did not understand, and that no one made him understand; he was made to read the Catechism and Bible with the utmost industry and an entire disregard of punctuation and significance; caused to imitate writing copies and drawing copies; given object lessons upon sealing wax and silk-worms and potato bugs and ginger and iron and suchlike things; taught various other subjects his mind refused to entertain. (Wells 1993b, 6)

Then, at the age of twelve, Polly is removed from this school to a private school to ‘finish off... under the guidance of an elderly gentleman, who... took snuff, wrote copperplate, explained nothing and used a cane with remarkable dexterity and gusto’ (6). It is not at all unreasonable to describe these as ‘quarter-educations’.

Where for Gissing’s Whelpdale the ‘quarter-educated’ had been a commercial opportunity, and where for Q. D. Leavis they had been a danger to culture, for Wells these people are a criminal series of wasted opportunities. As a reviewer of fiction in the 1890s, as Linda Anderson argues, Wells’s commitment had been to texts that ‘focussed attention on society... He applauded the attempt to bring lower class experience into literature, and to widen the scope of the novel beyond the values and experiences of the middle class’ (Anderson 1998, 112). He reviewed Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and Arthur Morrison’s *A Child of the Jago* with general approval, calling Morrison’s novel ‘the most important naturalistic novel of the period’, and praising Hardy for tackling the problems of the working man who wishes to gain an education, and for giving a sound representation of ‘the voice of the educated proletarian, speaking more distinctly than it has ever spoken before in English literature’ (Cox 1970, 283).⁴ At the same time, though, he suggested that there was a problem

with such fiction in that it tended to be written from the perspective of the middle-class writer who was really remote from the sufferings he described. This problem also infects Wells's own realist fiction. It is certainly true that Wells patronizes his lower-middle-class characters, which is probably an unavoidable technical problem in the attempt to write sympathetically and articulately about those who are circumstantially incapable of speaking and writing on their own behalf. His evocations of this order of life are indeed distanced from the protagonists by satire and humour, and that might well be a kind of self-protective camouflage intended to disguise his proximity to their fate. Like Dickens, whom he greatly admired, Wells makes use of comedy to make his wider political point.

In Wells's aesthetic vision, there are clearly circumstances when escapism – the escapism of popular fiction – is not a dirty word. Thus, despite being seriously hampered by inadequate education, both Kipps and Mr Polly read for pleasure, though they do this with different levels of success. Wells has his characters read fiction for other purposes also. In part he is making the case for the value of entertainment, amusement and escapism, for who would not wish to escape from the lives led by Kipps and Polly? The rich fantasy life of Mr Polly in particular is responsible for everything that is good in that life. So long as books do not deal with the areas of life that school has killed for him, Mr Polly loves to read:

He began to read stories voraciously, and books of travel, provided they were also adventurous. He got these chiefly from the local institute, and he also 'took in' irregularly, but thoroughly, one of those inspiring weeklies that dull people used to call 'penny dreadfuls',⁵ admirable weeklies crammed with imagination. At fourteen, when he emerged from the valley of the shadow of education, there survived something, indeed it survived still ... at five-and-thirty, that pointed ... to the idea that there was interest and happiness in the world. (Wells 1993b, 7)

In Wells's fiction, what a character reads is an indication of that character's bearing and development; however, Wells's characters are not just going through a phase in their choice of reading. What Kipps or Mr Polly read at the age of fourteen is a pretty good indication of their taste for life. The adolescent fictional adventures read by Mr Polly inform his adult life. With his newfangled bicycle as his trusty steed, Mr Polly rides through English countryside like a latter-day Don Quixote until he meets 'Romance' in the form of a schoolgirl called Christabel. 'You make me feel like one of those old knights ... who rode

about the country looking for dragons and beautiful maidens in chivalresque adventures,' he tells her (Wells 1993b, 66). Trapped into marriage with Miriam Larkins, he evades the tedium of his life as a gentleman's outfitter in books, travelling round the country to sales where he buys up anything in book form, and reads it – 'except theology' (101):

and as he read, his little unsuccessful circumstances vanished and the wonder of life returned to him; the routine of reluctant getting up, opening the shop, pretending to dust it with zest, breakfasting with a shop egg underdone or overdone ... and coffee made Miriam's way ... all these things vanished as the auditorium of a theatre vanishes when the stage is lit. (Wells 1993b, 101)

Although the manner of his buying of books makes his reading indiscriminating, Mr Polly really does know the difference between good and bad writing even if he cannot say what it is, and has a fascination for well-polished prose: 'He read Fenimore Cooper and *Tom Cringle's Log* side by side with Joseph Conrad ... until his heart ached to see those sun-soaked lands before he died. Conrad's prose had a pleasure for him that he was never able to define, a peculiar deep-coloured effect' (102). Fiction, in other words, gives him escapist aspiration towards those far-flung climes on the other side of the world, and an aesthetic pleasure that he cannot analyse – but that he feels nonetheless. And his sheer pleasure in words – their sound and their feel on his tongue, as he mutters malapropisms of occasionally startling and ironic accuracy – implies that even the prosaic Mr Polly has an unrealized poetry in him.

There is a profoundly anti-Victorian irresponsibility about *The History of Mr Polly*. The story turns in the end on Polly's discovery that 'If the world does not please you, *you can change it*' (137, emphasis in original). This does not mean political revolution; to Mr Polly, it simply means reclaiming the pleasure in life by leaving behind all the things that he has come to hate – his shop and his wife. Having at first decided to kill himself and set fire to the shop so that his wife would get the insurance, Mr Polly becomes an unwilling hero: the fire is too successful and threatens to burn to death his neighbour's elderly mother whom Mr Polly then rescues. Having taken that first step, he decides to clear out of his home and go tramping. He comes to rest at the Potwell Inn, an Edenic place for a man who has suffered agonies from indigestion brought on by his wife's bad cooking. The inn is presided

over by a plump woman who attracts him, and who needs him to help her to run the place. It is also threatened by the evil Uncle Jim, a man who has been 'reformed' in a prison on distinctly vicious lines. Mr Polly defeats Jim more by luck than good judgement, and is permitted to inhabit his Eden happily ever after. It does not matter to Wells that Polly's pleasure is based on arson and fraud since the ends justify the means: personal happiness in these circumstances is a defeat of the system at large, and the system is bad. This ending points out – as Wells's endings often do – the limitations of a strict application of realist principles. Mr Polly has no right to assume within those principles that his life will end happily; nor does Kipps or indeed Ann Veronica. Wells habitually alters the frame of reference, as if in recognition that adherence to realism means defeat for his characters. The endings partake of fantasy not reality because the persistence of realism leaves no space for happiness if strictly observed.

The History of Mr Polly is fun to read and was probably fun to write. But Wells was not just a journeyman novelist who turned a profit and had no aesthetic vision. The long relationship he enjoyed, and then endured, with Henry James, documented in many letters and reviews, is testament to a fairly coherent critical and creative position. *The Record of their Friendship* edited by Edel and Ray makes fascinating reading in its expression of two very different personalities and two diametrically opposed views of what fiction is for. The editors summarize the grounds of their discussions as involving 'two formulae for fiction'. As a socialist:

Wells...believed in *la littérature engagée*, a usable, functional art appropriate to the world [he] wished to fashion out of the old. James preferred... to take life as it comes, to deal with it in its *status quo*, with measure, balance and moderation. There was enough for the artist to do in the act of seeing, feeling arriving at awareness – without making of his creations instruments for social instruction and guidance. (Edel and Ray 1959, 11)

This is, of course, a different way of stating the distinction between sociological and psychological fiction that Raymond Williams identified. On the evidence collected by Ray and Edel, Wells in fact made a pretty good case for social engagement as a necessary part of fiction, though his editors do not always credit him with the force of his ideas. His essay 'The Contemporary Novel' (1914), originally a talk for the *Times* Book Club in 1911, might not have quite the same kind of

rhetorical force as Woolf's 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' or 'Modern Fiction', but it does have an interesting argument to make. Wells begins by constructing the typical reader as a 'Weary Giant', 'a man, burthened, toiling, worn':

He has been in his office from ten to four, with perhaps only two hours interval for lunch... Now at last comes the little precious interval of leisure, and the Weary Giant takes up a book. Perhaps he is vexed: he may have been bunkered, his line may have been entangled in the trees, his favourite investment may have slumped, or the judge have had indignation and been extremely rude to him. He wants to forget the troublesome realities of life. He wants to be taken out of himself, to be cheered, consoled, amused – above all, amused. He doesn't want ideas, he doesn't want facts; above all he doesn't want – *Problems*. He wants to dream of the bright, thin, gay excitements of the phantom world – in which he can be hero – of horses ridden and lace worn and princesses rescued and won. He wants pictures of funny slums, and entertaining paupers... He wants romance without its defiance, and humour without its sting; and the business of the novelist, he holds, is to supply this cooling refreshment. (Wells in Edel and Ray 1959, 132–3)

So far, so Q. D. Leavis: how outrageous to wish only to be entertained. In some ways, this reader is Mr Polly, who may not be a giant, weary or otherwise, but who also wants to be consoled, to escape from everyday life in his reading, and to become the vicarious hero of unlikely romances. But there is an essential difference of course, in the class of the Weary Giant and the class of the failed draper. Mr Polly's working day is considerably longer than six hours; he gets precious little exercise (and none on a golf course), and his lunch is not worth eating, let alone spending two hours over. Moreover, in *The History of Mr Polly*, romance is largely absent except to be deflated, and humour certainly does have its sting.

Wells's prescription for the novel, whilst admitting that refreshment and entertainment are important, is, as befits a socialist writer, a quasi-Marxist argument which takes it for granted that there is a relationship between reality and fiction that is not all one way. It is not simply that fiction should reflect reality in all its phases; in addition, fiction can recreate reality in its own image. The novel, writes Wells:

is to be the social mediator, the vehicle of understanding, the instrument of self-examination, the parade of morals and the exchange of customs, the *factory* of customs, the criticism of laws and institutions and of social dogmas and ideas... I do not mean for a moment that the novelist is

going to set up as a ... sort of priest with a pen, who will *make* men and women believe and do this and that. The novel is not a new sort of pulpit ... But the novelist is going to be the most potent of artists, because he is going to present conduct, *devise* beautiful conduct, discuss conduct, analyse conduct, *suggest* conduct, illuminate it through and through. He will not teach, but discuss, point out, plead, and display. (Wells in Edell and Ray 1959, 154–5, my emphases)

The novelist, then, will not make people behave in certain ways; but he (or even she) will make people think. Imagining and presenting alternative realities is a way of making them possible, of opening up new conceptions. Thus the novelist in Wells's discussion is like the paradigmatic character of his fiction: he seeks to break down boundaries in the way that people behave towards one another. The emphasis on 'conduct' is interesting here since conduct and propriety were watchwords of Victorian morality, and that emphasis is apparently a world away from the 'dark places of psychology'. But the ways in which we behave to each other are surely related to the ways in which we think both about ourselves and about others.

In these terms, then, what is the message of *The History of Mr Polly* or of *Kipps*? The obvious message is that there are people forced to lead very narrow lives on the basis of poor education, inhumane working conditions and poverty: this is not news. There is quietly expressed outrage about those wasted lives; and there is a will to argue that these lives are as valuable as anyone else's. Wells does not always get the tone right: he does patronize his creations. But in making them central – as a writer like Woolf or Joyce never would – and in pursuing fantasy-endings over grimly realistic ones – as Arthur Morrison and George Gissing refused to do – he writes a qualified optimism for a better world.

Galsworthy the materialist

Alone amongst the triumvirate of so-called Edwardian novelists, John Galsworthy (1867–1933) chooses the milieu of the comfortable middle classes as the setting for his most famous work, *The Forsyte Saga*. In social terms, at least, this could be the world of a Henry James or Virginia Woolf novel. It is certainly related to the fictions of Forster, with the Forsytes and the Wilcoxes (from *Howards End*) having a great deal in common. Moreover, although *The Forsyte Saga* is a social world away from the settings described by D. H. Lawrence, like *The Rainbow* (1915), where 'The Brangwens had lived for generations at Marsh

Farm' (Lawrence 1995, 9), the origins of the Forsytes are similarly plebeian and lost in the mists of time; like the Brangwens, too, the modern generations of Forsytes are greatly influenced by the historical changes of the nineteenth century, though the precise nature of those influences on each of the two families differs as their social class differs. *The Rainbow* is as much a family saga as *The Forsyte Saga* is. As such, in terms of the distinction between sociological fiction about the economically impoverished and psychological fiction about the upper middle classes, one would expect Galsworthy to sit firmly with the psychologists. But, as John Stokes has observed, Galsworthy brings together 'emotional impetuosity with a concrete vision of the market' (Stokes 1992, 2), and the psychology of his fiction is firmly couched in opulent materiality. Thus, throughout the three volumes of *The Forsyte Saga* (*The Man of Property*, 1906, *In Chancery*, 1920 and *To Let*, 1921) the psychology of the comfortable upper middle classes is probed, using the symbol of property as the outward sign of inner feeling. The perspective of the narrator is that of 'Young' Jolyon Forsyte, only son of the oldest member of the family, also named Jolyon. Like Galsworthy himself, Young Jolyon is born on the inside of the hegemonic property-owning class; and like Galsworthy, Young Jolyon becomes an outsider through the twinned pursuits of illicit sexual desire, and artistic vocation. Their perspective is that of ironic judgement. They know the Forsyte world intimately and remain part of the Forsyte species despite their apparent escape from its narrowness. Young Jolyon, a water-colour artist is given sage financial advice about his art; he should paint in a manner that could be easily 'read' by his potential public, and he would thereby gain a sale. The words of the critic 'bore good fruit with young Jolyon; they were contrary to all that he believed in, to all that he theoretically held good in his Art, but some strange, deep instinct moved him against his will to turn them to profit' (Galsworthy 1978, 251). This sums up something about Galsworthy's aesthetics too. He might stand against the philistine values of the Forsyte-type, but he also panders to their taste in the making of his fiction.

Soames Forsyte, the eponymous man of property of the saga's first volume, stands as a typical representative of his class. He is formulated in the phrase 'The Man of Property' by Old Jolyon Forsyte, the patriarch of the family; and that sense of property defines not only an individual characteristic of Soames, but also the characteristic trait of all the Forsytes:

There was old Jolyon in Stanhope Places; the Jameses in Park Lane; Swithin in the lonely glory of orange and blue chambers in Hyde Park

Mansions ... the Soameses in their nest of Knightsbridge; the Rogers in Prince's Gardens (Roger was that remarkable Forsyte who had conceived and carried out the notion of bringing up his four sons to a new profession. 'Collect house property – nothing like it!' he would say; 'I never did anything else!'). (Galsworthy 1978, 25)

This is a roll-call of the more expensive areas of London which are the natural habitat of the Forsytes species. All the Forsytes are defined by their sense of property, by the solid materiality of their comfortable existence. Old Jolyon, however, instinctively understands that Soames's sense of ownership is an obsession that goes beyond the bounds of decency.

As the Man of Property, Soames collects art for the sheer pleasure of ownership rather than for aesthetic reasons; most importantly, however, his sense of property extends beyond proper boundaries to his beautiful wife whose 'power of attraction he regarded as part of her value as his property' (59): 'Could a man own anything prettier than this dining-table with its deep tints, the starry, soft-petalled roses, the ruby-coloured glass, and quaint silver furnishing; could a man own anything prettier than the woman who sat at it?' (70). The story of the Soameses' failed relationship takes place against the backdrop of the multiple changes that characterized the fin de siècle – social, historical, familial and personal changes. The fact that Irene and Soames married in 1883, for example, is highly significant to the story, for in 1883 the Married Woman's Property Act of 1882 finally came into force, meaning that married women could own their own property and beginning the process of separating married women from the legal status of *femme couverte*.⁶ The Act is explicitly and implicitly referred to at various points throughout the three volumes. Nicholas Forsyte, for example, 'had married a good deal of money, of which, it being then the golden age before the Married Woman's Property Act, he had mercifully been enabled to make a successful use' (27). Legislative change has not, however, produced the cultural change it is commonly supposed to. Irene is not property but Soames does not adapt to that fact buoyed up, perhaps, by the continuity that is preserved against the backdrop of change. The older generation holds on to its values in the same way as it holds on to its possessions.⁷ And whatever the historical shifts, family life is always made up of small quarrels and jostlings for position so that there is a sense of the continuity of human nature in the context of the larger movements of human affairs.

The action proper begins with Soames's decision to build for himself a country house as a gilded cage in which to keep his wife: 'To get Irene

out of London, away from opportunities of going about and seeing people, away from her friends and those who put ideas in her head' (61). He hires an architect, Philip Bosinney, to design the house for him. The house is to be a statement of his importance, and a setting for his collection of *objets d'art*, including Irene. Irene, however, falls in love with Bosinney and has an affair with him. In an attempt to reassert his property rights over his wife, Soames rapes her; she tells Bosinney what has happened, and the architect, in a state of impotent horror, walks under a bus in a London fog and is killed. *The Man of Property* ends with Irene's enforced return to her husband since she has no money and nowhere else to go. Material circumstances, that is, dictate her final action in the first part of the saga.

The interwoven family stories that make up the saga are not in themselves particularly remarkable. Nor does Galsworthy involve himself in conscious experimentation with the form of fiction. When Woolf accused the Edwardians of making do with the old tools of the nineteenth-century novelists for the new circumstances of modernity, regarding their refusal to adapt as a failure, Galsworthy is probably the most 'guilty' of the parties. This is certainly fiction based in pattern rather than the nebulous realm of rhythm. The action of the main plot is mediated through a series of family gatherings, both formal and informal where gossip is exchanged. Just like the minor characters in George Eliot's fiction, the extended Forsyte family have a choric role, commenting on the action as it unfolds just offstage. In addition, Galsworthy learned from the Naturalists an emphasis on the 'type' rather than on a fully realized and essentialist individuality, dramatized on his emphasis on the Forsytes as a species. Metaphors of animal and bird species abound throughout, from the first page where a Forsyte family gathering is described as a 'charming and instructive sight – an upper-middle-class family in full plumage' (11). The family's instinctive distrust of Bosinney the architect comes from their sense that he does not belong to their species: 'Like cattle when a dog comes into the field, they stood head to head and shoulder to shoulder, prepared to run upon and trample the invade to death' (15–16). It is the partial outsider, young Jolyon, who is able to articulate what they are and what they feel, giving an ironic description of the Forsyte species as only a partial outsider can – he calls himself a 'mongrel' and 'the missing link' (202):

a 'Forsyte' is a man who decidedly more or less the slave of property. He knows a good thing, he knows a safe thing, and his grip on property – it

doesn't matter whether it be wives, houses, money or reputation – is his hall-mark...I should like...to lecture on it: 'Properties and quality of a Forsyte. This little animal, disturbed by the ridicule of his own sort, is unaffected by in his motions by the laughter of strange creatures... Hereditarily disposed to myopia, he recognizes only the persons and habitats of his own species, amongst which he passes an existence of competitive tranquillity.' (Galsworthy 1978, 202)

The concept of the Forsytes as a species is played out in various ways. It is no accident, for example, that some of the key scenes of *The Man of Property* take place at London Zoo (on a day when it costs a shilling to get in, so that 'there would not be all those horrid common people' [161]) and at Kew Gardens, places of course, where species are there to be examined for the public's edification. The concept of heredity and environment making character is derived from the Naturalists of French literature. Zola had famously described the novel as an experimental place, where environment, heredity and temperament would be added together like so many chemicals in a test-tube to produce predictable results in human behaviour (see Zola in Becker 1963, 162–96). That is not to say, however, that Galsworthy's evocation of the habitat of the Forsytes is utterly deterministic (for young Jolyon breaks out), nor that it is psychologically naïve, nor that it is badly written.

In a world where *things* matter – where objects are the marker of character – and in a novel which explicitly advertises itself as being about 'property', it is no surprise that psychology is expressed by those things, which then take on an almost animated existence of their own. The drawing-room at Uncle Timothy's house, for example, is stuffed to bursting with material objects: 'for Timothy and his sisters... considered that a room was not quite "nice" unless it was "properly" furnished. It held, therefore, eleven chairs, a sofa, three tables, two cabinets, innumerable knick-knacks, and part of a large grand piano' (167). That is the proper 'habitat' of a Victorian Forsyte – an advertisement through conspicuous consumption, of personal wealth which is the marker of personal worth. It is also a satire on an older generation. The over-stuffed houses of the Victorians, it is implied, are a sign of their general intellectual stuffiness. This is the psychology of William James, not the psychology of Sigmund Freud, a commonsense psychology that equates the clearly visible and legible with proper knowledge character. David Trotter has argued that this is a severely limited mode of writing, which imposes an equally limited mode of reading through the relentless emphasis on reading the details (Trotter 1993, 87–8). This may be

partly true, but there are also elements of subtlety and complexity in Galsworthy's presentation of his types.

Soames Forsyte, for example, also partakes of that more subterranean psychology associated with modernity. He is a character as it were, in transition, between two modes of being, an externalized personality, and an internalized one: and the split in him is registered in relation to his reading habits. Soames we are told is a voracious consumer of fiction, a Wellsian 'weary giant'. For example, he considers his failing marriage in relation to the novels he has read, and to the 'Problem' plays (that is, plays about adultery and its aftermath) he has seen on the London stage:

Like most novel readers of his generation... literature coloured his view of life; and he had imbibed the belief that it was only a matter of time. In the end the husband always gained the affection of his wife. Even in those cases – a class of book he was not very fond of – which ended in tragedy, the wife always died with poignant regrets on her lips, or if it were the husband who died – unpleasant thought – threw herself on his body in an agony of remorse.

He often took Irene to the theatre, instinctively choosing the modern Society plays with the modern Society conjugal problem, so fortunately different from any conjugal problem in real life. He found that they too always ended in the same way. (Galsworthy 1978, 71)

Soames uses literature to find the endorsement of views he already holds rather than to have those views challenged. *The Man of Property* ironically ends with a scene that is superficially similar to the ones that he prefers in fiction, with his wife returning to him after the death of her lover, so that one can see that Galsworthy is self-consciously appealing to that market of weary-giant readers made up of the world's Soameses. At the same time, however, Soames 'often sympathized with the lover' (71) who threatened the fictional marriage – and so, of course, does the reader of Soames's story, for Bosinney is presented sympathetically as Soames is not. Thus, on the one hand, Soames Forsyte exercises the position of judgement of the reader of realism, judging by results; on the other, he becomes embroiled in emotional responses that do not sit easily with his intellectual position. This ambiguity is shared by Galsworthy's own readers. The brutal husbands who force their wives into submission both attract and repel readers like Soames, precisely because they would like to be among them but dislike their brutality. But Soames still cannot make Irene love him whether he behaves brutally or not. The limitations of his position as

a man of property make it impossible for him to see beyond the question of property in his emotional life.

Soames, then, is insufficiently self-conscious to make sense of his own actions. The split in his personality between a transparent sense of cause and effect and his barely known emotional life is mirrored in the techniques used to describe his mental state. The morning after the rape provides a case in point.

The morning after a certain night on which Soames at last asserted his rights and acted like a man, he breakfasted alone ... He ate steadily, but at times a sensation as though he could not swallow attacked him. Had he been right to yield to his overmastering hunger of the night before, and break down the resistance which he had suffered now too long from this woman who was his lawful and solemnly constituted helpmate? (Galsworthy 1978, 264)

There is no secure perspective in this passage, written both from Soames's point of view in his cliché-ridden language of emotional illiteracy, and from a perspective which requires the reader to judge his actions. It is reasonable to assume that most people would regard rape as a criminal act, even though no actual law has been broken.⁸ If we are to see this description as an evocation of Soames's state of mind, what we see is ambivalence. On the one hand, the euphemistic elusive treatment of what Soames has done implies shame, as does his difficulty in swallowing his breakfast. One hunger of the body – sexual desire – has been displaced onto another, the desire for food; Soames knows he should not have indulged the former and consequently has trouble with the latter. On the other hand, the tone of the phrases 'asserted his rights and acted like a man' and 'his lawful and solemnly constituted helpmate' stands for the way in which Soames wishes to represent his act to himself. He wants to reassure himself that he has done the right thing. Euphemism and cliché are pursued as cloaks for immorality and as a comfort that he need not feel remorse. He tries to convince himself that it does not matter: 'The incident was not really of great moment; women made a fuss about it in books; but in the cool judgement of right-thinking men ... he had but done his best to sustain the sanctity of marriage, to prevent her from abandoning her duty' (265). These are the watchwords of his class – cool judgement, right-thinking men, the sanctity of marriage, duty – and he uses them to salve his conscience as automatic responses to any problem. Here, he rejects the teaching of books that elsewhere – when it suits him – he finds so useful. But 'the sound of smothered sobbing still haunted him'

and not even the automatic gesture of reading the *Times* can make it go away. Surely a solely materialistic being would not feel like that, and this is evidence that Galsworthy's way of seeing is not so psychologically naïve as it is sometimes presented as being.

Aesthetics and the market, or the artist and the artisan; or Mr Bennett and Mrs Woolf

I've been trying what I really could do in one day if I worked my hardest. Now just listen; it deserves to be chronicled for the encouragement of aspiring youth. I got up at 7.30, and whilst I breakfasted I read through a volume I had to review. By 10.30 the review was written – three-quarters of a column in the *Evening Budget* ... from 10.30 to 11, I smoked a cigar and reflected ... At eleven I was ready to write my Saturday *causerie* for *Will o' the Wisp*; it took till close upon one o'clock, which was rather too long. I can't afford more than an hour and a half for that job. At one, I rushed out to a dirty little eating-house ... Was back again by a quarter to two, having in the meantime sketched a paper for *The West End*. Pipe in mouth, I settled down to leisurely artistic work; by five, half the paper was done; the other half remains for tomorrow. From five to half-past, I read four newspapers and two magazines, and from half-past to a quarter to six, I sketched down several ideas that had come to me whilst reading. At six I was again in the dirty eating-house ... Home once more at 6.45, and for two hours wrote steadily at a long affair I have in hand for *The Current*. (Gissing 1985, 213)

It was my practice to be at my table every morning at 5.30 am, and it was also my practice to allow myself no mercy ... All those I think who have lived as literary men ... will agree with me that three hours a day will produce as much as a man ought to write. But then, he should so have trained himself that he shall be able to work continuously during those three hours, – so have tutored his mind that it shall not be necessary for him to sit nibbling his pen and gazing at the wall before him till he should have found the words which he wants to express his ideas. It had ... become my custom ... to write with my watch before me and to require from myself 250 words every quarter of an hour. I have found that the 250 words have been forthcoming as regularly as my clock went ... This division of time allowed me to produce ten pages of an ordinary novel volume a day, and if kept up through ten months would have given as its results three novels of three volumes each in the year. (Trollope 1996, 174–5)

Thursday November 2nd, 1899. To-day I wrote five articles; two reviews, two articles on 'The Black Tulip' play, and my weekly household notes ...

December 31st 1899. this year I have written 335, 340 words, grand total. 228 articles and stories (including 4 instalments of a serial of 30,000 – 7,500 words each) have actually been published.

Also my book of plays – ‘Polite Farces’

I have written six or eight short stories not yet published or sold.

Also the greater part of 55,000 word serial – ‘Love and Life’ – for Tillotson’s, which begins publication about April next year.

Also the whole draft (80,000 words) of my Staffordshire novel, ‘Anna Tellwright’.

My total earnings were £592 3s. 1d. of which sum I have yet to receive £72 10s. (Bennett I 1932, 116, 120)

These three quotations had to be reproduced at length in order for the scale of what they each describe to become apparent. The first is Jasper Milvain describing his day’s work in *New Grub Street*; the second is Anthony Trollope, discoursing about his own process for writing in his posthumously published *An Autobiography*; the third is from the diary of Arnold Bennett, in 1899 at the very start of the writing career that was to become a publishing phenomenon of the early twentieth century. Both Gissing and Bennett read Trollope’s *Autobiography* with rather different results. Gissing disapproved of the cheerfully cold-blooded description of Trollope’s working methods and dismissal of writer’s block, and gives similar sentiments to the villain of his novel; and Bennett seems to have approved since his description of his own working practice, his meticulous recording of what he wrote, and his account keeping of how much he got for it (also to be found in Trollope) looks very like the work of a man who was taking that epitome of the successful Victorian novelist as his role model.

Alongside the questions of what readers read novels for, the case of Arnold Bennett asks us to consider why writers write: is novel-writing an art and a vocation, or is it just a job of work to be paid by so many pence per column inch or per page as Trollope’s persona is constructed to suggest? Is the novelist an Artist, the capitalization signalling his (and it usually is a masculine position) struggle with and contempt for the world, or is he merely an artisan? Trollope suggested the latter with a notably gung-ho attitude, and Gissing feared that it was so. The Modernist generation favoured the former. Comparing Gissing’s *New Grub Street* with Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1849–50), and William Thackeray’s *Pendennis* (1850) with *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), P. J. Keating was struck by the fact that:

Neither *David Copperfield* nor *Arthur Pendennis* seem to feel that being a writer is anything to make much of a fuss about. It is a profession which can bring both financial rewards and a place in society. It demands talent and a degree of worldly experience, but not creative agony. Such an attitude is meaningless to Stephen Dedalus. Society is

something to escape from, and the very thought that one's work might bring public acclamation is enough to brand one as an inferior artist. (Keating 1968, 13)

This is perhaps a slight overstatement. Joyce certainly treats Stephen Dedalus with an ironic distance that comes from mockery, suggesting that Stephen is perhaps making too much fuss about artistic and philosophical integrity; and just like the Edwardian novelists, Joyce also makes great play of the intrusion of material circumstance on his 'hero's' delusions of grandeur, where every flight of fancy is – Icarus-like, of course – deflated by its juxtaposition with mundane considerations. But in the stories we tell ourselves about literature and its making, the favoured fiction that we retell and retail is that of the uncompromising Artist, preferably struggling in a garret against enormous odds. The man who can tot up a third of a million published and paid-for words over the course of a year may not be physically grubby as his attic-bound brother is, but he is marked as morally inferior. Surely no one can write so much and be any good, the preferred story suggests.

Ironic, then, that one of the chief purveyors of the Artist myth is Virginia Woolf, who had after all a distinctly materialistic side. The whole of *A Room of One's Own* is based on the argument that material conditions – a decent education, a room in which to write, and the leisure to do so, bought with the sum of five hundred pounds a year – are essential for the woman artist to do her work properly. This sum was, of course, left to Woolf in her aunt's will, and she comments:

The news of my legacy reached me one night about the same time that the act was passed that gave votes to women. A solicitor's letter fell into the post-box and when I opened it I found that she had left me five hundred pounds a year for ever. Of the two – the vote and the money – the money, I own, seemed infinitely more important. (Woolf 1993c, 33–4)

Rachel Bowlby quite rightly warns us not to take the voice in which this passage is written as that of Woolf herself; the book is spoken by a persona, not a person. Nonetheless, the money has produced, the persona admits, a spiritual change in her life. The freedom from hard-to-obtain, uncongenial work means that she need no longer flatter those she does not like, nor fear those who do not like her. Money has bought the liberty which makes it possible to write calmly and without bitterness, one of the ways in which Woolf defined true artistry. At the same time, however, *A Room of One's Own* also notes

that the great achievements of literature by men in the last two hundred years have nearly all been on the basis of wealth and the kind of education that wealth can buy. Browning's poetry is the result, says Woolf, of Browning's family being 'well to do': 'if he had not been well to do, he could no more have attained to write *Saul* or *The Ring and the Book* than Ruskin would have attained to writing *Modern Painters* if his father had not dealt prosperously in business' (Woolf 1993c, 96–7). What, though, of those of us who do not have relatives who could leave us a year's salary in a will – a very large majority? The position of the middle-class woman writer is not, after all, so very different from the position of the proletarian male writer, though the polemics of Woolf's discussion rather disguise that fact.

The passage I quoted above from Bennett's diary was selected because 1899 was the year in which Bennett himself first passed the magical figure of five hundred pounds earned by his pen, which represented a good middle-class income for a single man at this time. The myth of the Artist's struggles versus the sordid manoeuvrings of the artisan–entrepreneur have served Arnold Bennett particularly badly. A man with neither the cultural capital of an Oxbridge education nor the real capital of cash reserves ripe for inheritance from a wealthy family, Bennett took a very pragmatic attitude to writing – one that is much closer to Jasper Milvain's than to Edwin Reardon's. If he wanted to make a decent living by his pen, he had to do so by sheer graft. If he did not want to go hungry in the meantime, he had to pursue a course of discipline as rigorous as anything described by Trollope. And because his five hundred pounds a year had not been left to him 'for ever', and had to be earned again annually, Bennett as much as any Victorian novelist was on a treadmill of production in the literary machine. His diary records phenomenal rates of productivity. The third of a million words he published in 1899 does not include the diary itself but does include short serial pot-boilers for provincial newspapers, reviews and articles in papers and periodicals, short stories for magazines, and plays, and he was also working on the novel that would eventually become *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902). Just because he was writing at speed and for profit, however, does not mean that he was not a self-conscious artist figure as well. Indeed, his diary entries make it clear that the literary hack-work he undertook for his financial well-being was used throughout his career to subsidize what he saw as his more important work. The ephemeral pulp fiction, which was often published anonymously, bought him the time to write the major realist novels on which his reputation ought to rest.

John Carey calls Arnold Bennett the hero of *The Intellectuals and the Masses* and laments the fact that his reputation does not match his achievement:

His writings represent a systematic dismemberment of the intellectuals' case against the masses. He has never been popular with intellectuals as a result ... his novels are still undervalued by literary academics, syllabus devisers and other official censors. Many students of English literature know of him, if at all, only through Virginia Woolf's scornful estimate in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', and they naturally, though mistakenly, assume that Bennett, not Woolf, is diminished by that sally. (Carey 1992, 152)

Fair comment. Woolf certainly singled Bennett out for particularly harsh criticism in that essay, and there is a fundamental unfairness in her satirical characterization of Bennett as concerned only with the surface of things. In the essay, she imagines a figure named Mrs Brown, an elderly lady met by chance on a train. If Mr Bennett had seen Mrs Brown, and decided to make her the central figure of a novel his procedure would have been as follows:

'Begin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of shop assistants in the year 1878. Discover what her mother died of. Describe cancer. Describe calico. Describe—' (Woolf 1992a, 82)

But Woolf regards the description of external or material things as unimportant conventions of realist representation. The descriptions, she argues, don't tell us anything real, where 'real' stands for her perception of the psychological, spiritual dimensions of character and culture, not for the material conditions which in some measure produce those dimensions. Woolf's characters are 'deep', Bennett's are 'shallow', at least in her estimation – and shallow is, of course, a term of disapproval.

In fact, though, Bennett's characters are anything but 'shallow'. Writing of the genesis of *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908) in his Preface to the novel, Bennett describes one of the points of origin of his novel, a chance encounter with an elderly woman in a Paris restaurant in the autumn of 1903 – a Madame Lebrun perhaps? Bennett describes her as 'fat, shapeless, ugly and grotesque' and as a source of both irritation and amusement to the other customers in the café as she refuses to settle comfortably with her lumpy parcels. Bennett was not surprised

that some of the customers laughed at the old woman, but he describes feeling pained by the mockery of the two pretty young waitresses directed at the difficult older woman:

I reflected, concerning the grotesque diner: 'The woman was once young, slim, perhaps beautiful; certainly free from these ridiculous mannerisms. Very probably she is unconscious of her singularities. Her case is a tragedy. One ought to be able to make a heart-rending novel out of the history of a woman such as she.' Every stout ageing woman is not grotesque – far from it! – but there is an extreme pathos in the mere fact that every stout ageing woman was once a young girl with the unique charm of youth in her form and movements and in her mind. And the fact that the change from young girl to the stout ageing woman is made up of an infinite number of infinitesimal changes, each unperceived by her, only intensifies the pathos. (Bennett 1990, 32)

In describing the slow processes of physical, mental and emotional changes that make the old woman what she is, Bennett evokes an almost geological notion of time. The alterations in her from young woman to old woman accrete like strata in a process that is imperceptible to the naked eye. What her current state represents is layers and layers of depth caused by age and experience. She is largely unaware of the changes she has undergone, and other people who come across her at different times in her life see only the results of the change, not the process by which they came about. In the laughter of the two young waitresses, Bennett also introduces one of his consistent themes in his major fiction: the generation gaps which consistently make it impossible for the young to sympathize with the old. In his diary in 1897, he commented on the generation gap growing between himself and his father:

I noticed ... the approaches of middle-age upon him. I felt acutely that he and I were of different generations; that parent and child, be they never so willing, can never come intellectually together, simply because one time of life differs crudely and harshly from another. He has now the physical and mental deliberativeness which characterizes the ageing. I chafe under this slowness, but I need not do so: it is not a sign of decay, but of natural development. (Bennett 1932, 50)

He would make this theme central to *Clayhanger* (1910), where Edwin and his father are temperamentally different because they belong to different eras. But it is also a major part of *The Old Wives' Tale*. As girls,

Sophia and Constance have no inkling of the reality of other people's lives, and are casually indifferent to them. When their servant Maggie gets some new clothes, the narrator comments: 'With the profound and instinctive cruelty of youth [they] had assembled... expressly to deride Maggie in her new clothes. They obscurely thought that a woman so ugly and soiled as Maggie had no right to possess new clothes' (Bennett 1990, 43–4). At the end of the novel, the two ageing women, at the mercy of a succession of incompetent maids have that indifference turned back upon them, and they cannot understand why it should be so. The aim of representing such a figure as the old woman in the café (and the Old Wives in the novel become such figures at the end) is to produce pathos in the service of empathy, empathy being the only way in which the thick wall of personality and egotism described by Pater and recognized by Bennett as part of the human condition can be penetrated. Now this is not Woolf's interest at all as her treatment of Miss Kilman in *Mrs Dalloway* shows. For Bennett the Miss Kilmans come to occupy centre stage and *The Old Wives' Tale* makes the kind of women who would 'pass unnoticed in a crowd' (32) its focus.

The novel tells the story of two sisters brought up in a draper's shop in Bursley (a fictionalized version of Burslem, one of the towns that makes up the 'five towns', the conurbation of Stoke on Trent in the North Midlands of England). It is a comfortable but restricted life and both daughters kick against the limitations imposed upon them by their mother's ideas of propriety and the demands of the shop. Constance, as befits her name, settles down to marry the draper's apprentice-cum-manager, Samuel Povey, while Sophia escapes, albeit temporarily to Paris of the 1860s and 1870s. The two women end their days around 1906 – or roughly speaking, the present day of the novel's publication so that the novel charts a social history – and to some extent a political history – of the last years of the nineteenth century.

Bennett self-consciously modelled his realist fictions on the works of the French realists, Gustave Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant. His interest, like Galsworthy's, is centred on 'typicality' though he presents his types with less self-evident irony. Both Constance and Sophia live lives that are true to type, the result of heredity, environment and education. Despite Sophia's apparently more adventurous and romantic life, in fact, she lives very much as her sister does, and uses the skills of good housekeeping and management learned at her mother's knee to make her fortune in Paris. The novel suggests that no matter what external experience may bring, their early years and training in thrift and industry have formed their characters. It is these skills that Sophia

brings to bear against the backdrop of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) and the Siege of Paris. In Bennett's description, the Siege is not heroic or galvanizing; rather it is a sordid affair of black-market trading, eating meat from dubious sources (including the Paris Zoological Gardens), and the founding of Sophia's fortunes. Making the large events of official political history into a mere backdrop for individual developments is, of course, precisely what Woolf does, foregrounding her decision through the typographical insistence of presenting the First World War in parenthesis in the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*. Bennett is not so technically innovative, but there is a real sense in which he also brackets off history from the central interest of his story. 'No one,' wrote Woolf, after the 1914–18 war, 'can possibly believe that history as it is written closely resembles history as it is lived' (Woolf 1993a, 3). In his Preface to *The Old Wives' Tale*, Bennett says much the same thing. Realizing that he would have to include the Franco-Prussian War because of the chronology of his fiction, he asked his Parisian landlord and landlady what it had been like:

I said to the old man, 'By the way, you went through the Siege of Paris, didn't you?' He turned to his old wife and said, uncertainly, 'the Siege of Paris? Yes, we did, didn't we?' The Siege of Paris had only been one incident among many in their lives. Of course they remembered it well, though not vividly ... the most useful thing I gained from them was the perception, startling at first, that ordinary people went on living very ordinary lives ... and to the vast mass of the population, the siege was not the dramatic, spectacular, thrilling, ecstatic affair that is described in history. (Bennett 1990, 34)

This relative indifference is how Sophia also experiences it; it is an interruption of the process of daily life, a minor irritation rather than a total alteration. Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending* argues that there are two divisions of time that find their way into fiction, which he identifies by the words *kairos* and *chronos*. *Chronos* is roughly speaking the time of 'one damn thing after another' (Kermode 1967, 47), the time of chronology, or of time passing; *kairos* is significant time – the time of the Joycean epiphany, for example, or of Wordsworth's 'spots of time', the 'moments of crisis' which mark the beginnings and ends of phases of existence. This is related to Hayden White's observation that historical narrative is divided into two kinds:

The *diachronic*, or processional narratives ... and the *synchronic*, or static narratives ... In the former, the sense of structural transformation

is uppermost as the principle guiding representation. In the latter, the sense of structural continuity... or stasis... predominates. This distinction points... to a difference of emphasis in treating the relationship between continuity and change in a given representation of the historical process. (White 1973, 10–11)

Fiction might usually be thought of as more invested in *kairos* or diachronic forms of narrative. Bennett focuses on *chronos*, a synchronic representation of time as lived experience, and he is highly committed to this model of time in *The Old Wives' Tale*.

This, as John Lucas has observed, makes it extremely difficult to demonstrate his skill via short quotation and individual incident (Lucas 1974, 12), since every moment has to be read in the context of that slow accumulation of geological detail. One keynote moment will have to suffice. This is the evocation of the state of mind of Constance's baby son, Cyril Povey, aged about ten months:

the baby rolled about on the hearthrug, which had been covered with a large soft woollen shawl, originally the property of his great-grandmother. He had no cares, no responsibilities. The shawl was so vast that he could not clearly distinguish objects beyond its confines. On it lay an indiarubber ball, an indiarubber doll, a rattle and Fan [the dog]. He vaguely recollected all four items, with their respective properties. The fire was also an old friend. He had occasionally tried to touch it, but a high bright fence always came in between. For ten months he had never spent a day without making experiments on this shifting universe in which he alone remained firm and stationary... He pushed the ball away, and wriggled after it, and captured it with the assurance of practice. He tried to swallow the doll, and it was not until he had tried several times... that he remembered the failure of previous efforts and philosophically desisted. He rolled against the mountainous flank of the mammoth Fan, and clutched at Fan's ear. The whole mass of Fan upheaved and vanished from his view, and was instantly forgotten by him. He seized the doll and tried to swallow it, and repeated the exhibition of his skill with the ball... And so he had existed for centuries: no responsibilities, no appetites; and the shawl was vast. (Bennett 1990, 207–8)

This passage has an intrinsic interest as a proto-Freudian evocation of child psychology. Cyril Povey, for example, plays his own version of the fort/da game described by Freud; he is clearly in the grip of the pre-Oedipal delusion that he is the centre of his own universe; and he is outside (though only temporarily) the realm of measured time. The passage is also physiologically accurate in that small babies do indeed have difficulty in focussing beyond their immediate surroundings.

But the unconscious egotism of the child is also part of a much larger pattern of events in the novel, and is presented in the service of Bennett's philosophy of time and theory of representation. Like a real child, Cyril is involved in the compulsive repetition of small actions – pushing the ball away, trying to swallow the doll. This is almost pure *chronos*, a representation of repeated events that have no intrinsic significance, much as the daily round of real existence is filled with such events. His parents live also in such a world: '[Constance's] life had much in it of laborious tedium – tedium never-ending and monotonous ... both she and Samuel worked consistently hard, rising early, "pushing forward" ... and going to bed early from sheer fatigue; week after week and month after month as season changed imperceptibly into season' (190). In the wider context of the whole novel, then, Cyril's babyish consciousness is also symptomatic of character more generally. Galsworthy described the Forsytes as 'myopic'; Bennett dramatizes the child's myopia and its effects. By extension, the limited lives his parents lead are also somewhat short-sighted, bounded by the Square in the provincial town they inhabit as Cyril's view is bounded by the shawl. The shop they run, inherited from Constance's mother, like the shawl inherited from her great-grandmother, cushions them from material want, but blinds them to the wider world. Cyril's egotism is Constance and Samuel's egotism too. The Poveys live lives of Biffenseque 'ignoble decency', but unlike *Mr Bailey, Grocer, The Old Wives' Tale* is not a dull book.

Given her pronouncements about what reality consists of, it is something of a surprise that Virginia Woolf was so hostile to Bennett's procedures in novels such as *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger* (1910). In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf argued, from a broadly feminist position that in literary scholarship, 'it is masculine values that prevail,' she wrote: 'This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battle-field is more important than a scene in a shop' (Woolf 1993c, 67). Bennett, like Woolf, deals with both, and like Woolf, he privileges the mundane over the earth-shattering. Moreover, unlike Wells, Bennett has no overt 'programme' of didacticism in his fiction unless it be that empathy is what makes us human. Indeed, he once wrote to Wells about the differences in their world view. In contrast to Wells, he wrote in 1905:

I have no passion for Justice ... there we come to the 'difference between our minds'. I look down from a height on the show and contemplate a passion for justice much as I contemplate the other ingredients.

Whereas you are simply a passion for justice incarnate. You aren't an artist, except insofar as you disdainfully make use of art for your reforming ends ... Like all great reformers you are inhuman ... You are not really interested in individual humanity. (Bennett in Wilson 1960, 123–4)

In the image of the author looking 'down from a height' at the world he creates, Bennett represents himself as interested in patterns rather than alterations. Like Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Bennett's persona 'like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails' (Joyce 1992b, 235). Except, perhaps that he is not indifferent. No one needs to get out their cheque book to complete a Bennett novel, but there is a message in Bennett's fiction, and it is concerned with empathy, with sympathetic identification with character rather than judgement of either character, as with Galsworthy, or of the social circumstances that have formed them, as with Wells. The interest in individual humanity is what counts, and there are worse things to suggest to one's readers.

In the end, though, the real difference between Woolf and the Edwardian novelists of whom she apparently disapproved, is not to do with *what* they tell in their fictions, but to do with *the way that they tell it*. Their visions may each be complex, but they continue to 'tell what they saw in a clear way' as the Victorian novelists had done. No one needs an academic training to read Wells or Bennett or Galsworthy; but most inexperienced readers need at least some help with Woolf and Joyce. 'The Edwardian tools are the wrong ones for us to use,' wrote Woolf in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' because they lay too much stress 'on the fabric of things' (Woolf 1992a, 82). The new generation, in contrast, felt hemmed in by this materiality and was forced to find a new language in which to express a slightly different reality: 'Signs of this are everywhere apparent. Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated ...' (84). It is an effort to read the new things as the new novelists and poets grapple towards an adequate way of expressing the reality of Mrs Brown, and this requires the patience of the reader: 'do not expect at present as complete and satisfactory presentment of her. Tolerate the spasmodic and obscure, the fragmentary, the failure' (87). But even Woolf admits a certain nostalgia for the comfortable reading offered by Galsworthy, Wells and Bennett. As she reads the lines of T. S. Eliot's poetry, she writes, 'I cry out, I confess, for the old decorums, and envy the indolence of my ancestors who, instead of spinning madly through mid-air, dreamt quietly in the shade with a book' (85).

To my mind, the pendulum of academic taste has swung too far towards the Georgians, and forgetting to read the Edwardians is to privilege the tastes of the elite at the expense of a more democratic vision in content, certainly, but also in terms of form.

Notes

1. 'As wide as Broad Street' is slang for 'worldly wise', most likely with criminal intent. Toffs are the upper classes.
2. The 1880s and 1890s saw an explosion of sociological reporting on the conditions of the poor in London's East End. Andrew Mearns's *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883), George Sims's *How the Poor Live* (1883) and William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890) are just some of the more famous titles of social investigative work undertaken in the period.
3. In the UK, rates were the local taxes levied on householders to pay for local services such as education, lighting and refuse collection.
4. This review appeared anonymously in the *Saturday Review*; it is Anderson who directed my attention to its having been written by Wells.
5. 'Penny dreadfuls' were cheap comic books, mostly containing stories of a sensational, and often violent kind, marketed specifically at working-class adolescent boys. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, there were campaigns to prevent their apparently pernicious influence on the youth of the day, and Christian organizations in particular tried to publish – with limited success – their own newspapers for the same market, but with a much more pious agenda. To find out more about reading for boys in the late nineteenth century, see Bristow 1991.
6. The phrase literally means 'covered woman' and refers to the legal position of married women at this time; a woman's legal identity was 'covered' by that of her husband, who represented her in all legal matters.
7. Continuity is also signalled by the fact that no fewer than four separate characters have the name Jolyon Forsyte in the three volumes that make up the complete saga. Names similarly represent continuity in Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941) where 'half the ladies and gentlemen present would have said, "Adsum; I'm here in place of my grandfather or great-grandfather"' (1992d, 47), and as they also do in Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, where Tom and Will Brangwens proliferate.
8. British law did not recognize rape within marriage until 1992. Nonetheless, George Forsyte guesses what has happened in his cousin's house from Bosinney's disconnected ravings, and strongly disapproves of him. Soames might have 'rights' as a husband; but he offends against the code of chivalry expected of the English gentleman when he uses violence against his wife.

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