Character and Liberalism
by Bernard Bergonzi

When Ortega y Gasset was writing his *Notes on the Novel* in the nineteen-twenties he could still take it for granted that the fundamental purpose of the novel was the presentation of character:

> Let the reader recall the great novels of former days that have lived up to the high standards of our time, and he will observe that his attention is turned to the personages themselves, not to their adventures. We are fascinated by Don Quixote and Sancho, not by what is happening to them. In principle a *Don Quixote* as great as the original is conceivable in which the knight and his servant go through entirely different experiences. And the same holds for Julien Sorel or David Copperfield.

Indeed, Ortega assumed that this interest was being intensified in the work of Proust, which offered opportunities for the ever greater and more leisurely contemplation of character, even if at the expense of dramatically interesting action. And in so far as Proust—like Joyce—represented the culmination of the realistic novel as well as its destruction, Ortega was not wholly wrong. Nevertheless, I presume that no intelligent modern reader could read his remarks without some slight incredulity. The notion that character can be considered as an absolute, without necessary reference to a given literary context, is a quintessential nineteenth-century concept; it underlies, for instance, Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, a celebrated work in which the influence of the nineteenth-century novel is everywhere apparent; it has been pilloried in such a statement of twentieth-century critical orthodoxy as L. C. Knights' *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?*

Later opinion has swung sharply in the other direction. The stress is much more on Proust or Joyce in their destructive or innovatory aspects, which seem to make traditional ways of seeing character as an absolute no longer conceivable. Lawrence's well-worn phrase, 'You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable ego—of the character', is frequently invoked. These literary considerations are likely to be backed up by strong but inchoate feelings about the changed nature of reality, the change arising from the decline of religious or metaphysical certainties, the influence of modern psychology, and the public crimes and traumas of the twentieth century. Here, for instance, is Alberto Moravia, in an essay called 'The Man and the Character', written in 1941 and collected in his book *Man as an End*:

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> This crisis in the character obviously corresponds to a similar crisis in the concept of man. Modern man can be seen as a mere numerical entity within the most terrifying collectivities that the human race has ever known. He can be seen as existing not for himself alone but as part of something else, of a collective feeling, idea and organism. It is very difficult to create a character out of such a man, at least in the traditional sense of the word.

Moravia was writing during the Second World War, in a country still committed to the ideology of fascism, which took it for granted that man did not exist for himself alone, 'but as part of something else, of a collective feeling, idea and organism'. Fascism may have been defeated, but in the intervening years, most advanced societies, whether liberal-democratic or communist, have seen the individual increasingly subject to collective controls, whether by a bureaucratic state apparatus, by the pressures of the industrial urban environment, or by the conditioning apparatus of a capitalist high-consumption society. In such a world the free-standing literary character is indeed likely to be threatened. Moravia, as a traditional humanist, regarded this situation with a certain elegiac tone; his later essays show that he has not lost faith in the future of the novel, but that he regards it as no longer concerned with the presentation of character, but with the inner explorations of the author; the kind of novel, in fact, for which Proust, looked at under another aspect, might serve as a model.

There is a similar analysis in Robbe-Grillet's *Towards a New Novel*, but the tone is significantly different; there is nothing of the traditional humanist about Robbe-Grillet, who was trained as a scientist before he turned to literature, and whose only concern with humanism is to abolish it. Robbe-Grillet is a brisk operationalist, concerned purely with questions of process and technique, and to my mind an almost perfect exponent of what Marcuse calls the one-dimensional consciousness. (Although underlying the tough modernity of his exposition there is a purely aesthetic concept of the art of the novel that has been inherited virtually unchanged from Flaubert.)

> In fact, the creators of character, in the traditional sense, can now do nothing more than present us with puppets in whom they themselves no longer believe. The novel that contains characters belongs well and truly to the past, it was peculiar to an age—that of the apogee of the individual.
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> It may not be progress, but it is certain that the present age is rather that of the regimental number. The destiny of the world no longer seems to us to be identified with the rise or fall of a few men or a few families. The world itself is no longer this private property, hereditary and profitable—a sort of prey to be conquered rather than understood. To have a name was no doubt very important in the days of Balzac's kind of bourgeoisie. And to have a character was important, too; and the more it became a weapon for hand-to-hand fighting, the hope of achieving success, the

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exercise of one's ascendency, the more important it was. It was *something*, to have a face, in a universe where personality was at the same time the means and end of every endeavour.

Our world today is less sure of itself and more modest, perhaps because it has abandoned the idea of the omnipotence of the individual, but it is more ambitious, too, as it looks beyond it. The exclusive cult of the 'human' has given place to a vaster, less anthropomorphic perception. The novel seems unsure of its step because it has lost what used to be its greatest support—the hero. If it doesn't manage to get back on to a proper footing it will mean that its life is intimately linked to that of a bygone society. If it does manage it, on the other hand, a new path will be open to it, with the promise of new discoveries.

Robbe-Grillet's aim seems to be to make the novel a fit occupant of a totalitarian society, where individuals no longer matter; it is not one I find at all congenial. At the same time, there is an extraordinary ambivalence in his approach: he sees that the nineteenth-century novel was the historical product of a particular society and set of assumptions about the world, which have now largely vanished; yet he also wants the 'novel', as a transcendental entity, to go on existing in a form that bears very little relation to anything previously bearing the name.

In fact, the whole of Robbe-Grillet's programmatic enterprise of presenting a 'cleansed' impersonal world of objects, which can be set over against human activity, with the aim of reducing man's domineering place in the universe, is shaky. It rests on a naïve epistemology, which posits a total separation between objects and human perception, whereas it is now a philosophical commonplace, to regard perception as a learnt and active process, so that the objects we see are part of a complex pattern of perception, which is in large measure culturally generated. Robbe-Grillet's notion of avoiding anthropomorphic metaphor in any case stops short in an arbitrary fashion, as Moravia has pointed out. Robbe-Grillet objects to the description of the sea as 'smiling', whilst approving such a supposedly neutral epithet as 'blue'. But, Moravia observes:

> The very fact of giving a vast expanse of water the name of sea is equivalent to humanizing it, for the fact of indicating an object by a word involves withdrawing it from the anonymous objectivity of the pre-human and extra-human world and incorporating it into the human world. In other words the word 'sea' is objective only in appearance; in reality it humanizes, that is subjectivizes, the object precisely because it names it. So at most the method only allows for allotting limits to the humanizing process, such as not allowing us to forget that the sea has properties and and characteristics which are not human.

Language as well as perception necessarily involves man with his physical environment.

The dehumanization that Robbe-Grillet looks for is not new in

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twentieth-century aesthetics: its roots can be found in the programmes and activities of the innovating artists of sixty years ago —those whom Frank Kermode has dubbed the 'paleo-modernists' in distinction to 'neo-modernists' like Robbe-Grillet himself. One thinks, for instance, of T. E. Hulme's insistence that a truly contemporary art should be 'geometrical' rather than 'organic' or 'vital', and that all obtrusive traces of the human should be diminished. Over the decades the attempt to achieve a total impersonality, the desire to abolish the traces of the human, has remained a major feature of twentieth-century art: we find the tendency to dehumanization being deplored in the twenties by a conservative like Ortega y Gasset and in the fifties by a Marxist like Ernst Fischer. And it has been linked with fascism, in a crude and naïve fashion, by C. P. Snow and those who think like him. The phenomenon is discussed in Wylie Sypher's book *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art*, which is pervaded by a wistful hope that somewhere, somehow a new humanism will emerge from the ashes of the old, even in the most unpromising contexts. Beckett features inevitably in Mr Sypher's discussion, and offers a convenient point to return to the question of character in the novel. As it has developed from *Murphy* Beckett's fiction shows a steady decline from character to an almost wholly sub-human mode of existence, ruined creatures with no more life in them than Robbe-Grillet's centipede crushed on the wall. And yet how superbly articulate they all are, how much and how well they all talk; seldom can a movement towards silence and non-being have been so talkatively expressed. It is in the extraordinary vitality of his language that the central paradox of Beckett's art resides: his humanoids all have a very cultivated and fluent way of expressing themselves. They are also, even *in extremis*, irresistibly comic: it may be that in the English-speaking world—or at least in the British Isles—the idea of Absurdity has more comic associations than in Continental contexts: the roads to Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll remain open, as the French surrealists were fascinated to discover over a generation ago. Thus, when Georg Lukàcs remarks of *Molloy*, 'He presents us with an image of the utmost human degradation—an idiot's vegetative existence', we feel that he has rather missed the point. Beckett's characters, or whatever one calls them, *are* images of the utmost human degradation; and yet, to adapt a famous line from Yeats, 'Molloy and Malone are gay!'. In Beckett, the language itself makes a continued act of defiance. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to put questions about the ultimate human worth of what Beckett offers. A great deal of Beckett criticism is narrowly technical, concerned with the endless challenge to explication that his writing presents: to offer a blunt criticism in the language of old-fashioned humanism—in Lukàcs' case, with a Marxist accent—ought to give the discussion of this strange genius a greater urgency and point.

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However we interpret him, we can agree that Beckett has taken the end of the individual, and the supersession of character, to an ultimate point. George Steiner has offered some suggestive though extreme speculations about the end of individualism (which, incidentally, I see no reason not to call 'totalitarian'). Pursuing McLuhan's ideas about the way in which the electronic media are forming a new global community and effecting the 'retribalization of man', after the fragmentary individualism of the print era, Steiner suggests that the growing practice of transplanting vital human organs may lead to a diminished sense of the uniqueness of human personality:

> The concepts of human interrelation, or organic community, which we now use superficially or as moral clichés, would come to express concrete realities and felt experience. Man would then pass, for the first time, from the closed sphere of private being into that of collectivity.

Cannibalism, presumably, might achieve a similar result. Steiner continues his argument, peering ahead into the collective human future desiderated by the Marxists:

> Our present notion of autonomous identity may be the result of a long, painful process of psychic individuation, of withdrawal from the collective group (the myth of Jacob wrestling with the Angel may be read as a metaphor of the agonizing struggle through which individual members of the species achieved a sense of self, a name). History might then be defined as an episode of personal self-definition, of *egoism* in the proper sense, between much longer pre- and post-historical eras of collective being. Such collectivity would obviously and fundamentally change the nature of art and literature. The voice of man would again be choral.

In such a situation, it goes without saying, the novel could no longer exist, although other forms of narrative might survive.

After these high-flying generalizations, I would like to pull the discussion back to the question of character in the novel. Although we may truly say that the novel is the characteristic literary form of an age of bourgeois individualism, the novel is concerned with more than simple individuals. The account of an isolated hero, asserting himself in the face of an alien or hostile environment, is, in fact, the typical pattern of American fiction. But in the European novel, character emerges when the unconditioned human organism is placed in a dialectical relationship with a social and moral order that, though intelligible, is complex, stratified and demanding. Again, although it is, I think, reasonable to refer to the nineteenth-century realistic novel as a whole, regardless of nationality, when talking at a certain level of generalization, one should also make further definitions in terms of national cultural division. In the French novel, the relation between the individual and society, although necessarily intimate, is apt to be sharp and antagonistic:

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one thinks of Rastignac's apostrophe to Paris at the end of *Père Goriot*: 'It's war to the death between us now', which Robbe-Grillet may have had in mind in his remark about character being 'a weapon for hand-to-hand fighting'. In the English novel, the tone is gentler, and the stress is on the ties of affection and community radiating outwards from the family to the larger social grouping. If Rastignac's farewell characterizes the French novel, then a comparable epiphany from English fiction would be that tender moment in *Middlemarch* when Mrs Bulstrode takes her husband's hand in a gesture of affection and support, after his misdeeds have been exposed. Martin Green has illuminatingly discussed this division in a recent essay in my book, *Innovations*; he contrasts the stress on the value of 'simple ordinary community life' that we find in Lawrence or Raymond Williams, with Sartre's intense dislike of the same thing, expressed, for instance, in his book on Genet which attacks the narrowness and viciousness of the peasant community in which Genet grew up. This 'English' attitude, which regards the ideal relation between the individual and the community as one of support rather than conflict, is given a theoretical dimension in Raymond Williams' essay 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel', in *The Long Revolution*.

On the Continent it seems to be assumed that the realistic novel of character has had its day; while American critics are agreed that it has never properly flourished in the United States. But in Britain it is widely held that such novels can and should go on being written, with few overt concessions to the changed *Weltanschauung* of the twentieth century. If we turn to the recent pronouncements of English novelists and critics, we find ourselves in a different intellectual world from that inhabited by Moravia or Robbe-Grillet. Here character is seen, not as an obsolescent feature of the novel whose existence can no longer be justified—as it is, for instance, by the American novelist, John Hawkes, who has remarked, 'I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme'—but as something self-evidently essential. And if there seems to be a prevalent decline in the importance of character, then this may be deplored but not regarded as historically inevitable. John Bayley's significantly named *The Characters of Love* asserts that not only should characters exist, but that their creators should love them; a sentiment which, one imagines, would excite the cold derision of Robbe-Grillet:

> What I understand by an author's love for his characters is a delight in their independent existence as *other people*, an attitude towards them which is analogous to our feelings towards those we love in life; and an intense interest in their personalities combined with a sort of detached solicitude, a respect for their freedom. This might be—indeed should be—a truism, but I suppose it to be one no longer. The writers whom we admire today do not appear to

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> love their characters, and the critics who appraise their books show no sign of doing so either. For a writer or critic to show delight in a character would seem today rather naïve, an old-fashioned response left over from the days of Dickens or Surtees. Characters, it seems, are no longer objects of affection. The literary personality has gone down in the world.

The disagreement about whether character is substantive or merely one element in a complex of literary qualities has become perennial: one thinks of Knights' attack on Bradley's way of interpreting Shakespeare; or the arguments about *Ulysses* between those who see it as an immensely intricate verbal structure, radically unlike traditional novels, and those who insist on regarding *Ulysses* as, before everything else, a realistic novel, about three people called Leopold, Stephen and Molly in the city of Dublin in the year 1904.

Bayley's discussion is important; he has continued it in his more recent book *Tolstoy and the Novel* and several articles. To put his argument in cruder terms than he might wish: he is more interested in content than in form, and he is vehemently opposed to the aestheticism or formalism that is most interested in the shape of fiction, in asserting the presence of art, or in constructing closed worlds of the imagination. For Bayley Tolstoy is the supreme novelist—a judgment from which I presume no one would wish to dissent—because he presents not *a* world, but *the* world; in Tolstoy's fiction, the experiences of the novel flow inevitably into our own experiences, and the characters we meet have the freedom, the opacity, the unpredictability of the people we ourselves know and love. All else is 'pastoral', where experience is cut down to size, structured and otherwise interfered with in the interests of some formal irrelevance. Even so great a novelist as Proust is inevitably limited, by tidying up life and imposing moral formulae on it: 'Tolstoy is like life and Proust is like a vision of it. . . .' I accept this particular insight, whilst feeling disturbed by Bayley's need to press home mostly though not exclusively Tolstoy—as marked by his total acceptance of and openness to life in all its aspects; an acceptance which in some moods, it seems, is Franciscan, and in others Stoic. Again, I feel partial agreement, then sharp disagreement. What Bayley seems to be asking for is contemplation, whilst overlooking the fact that contemplation is usually something we direct towards art rather than life, which so often involves us in action of welcome or unwelcome kinds. There are times when Bayley's reasonable preference for Life becomes so emphatic that one wonders why he wants to bother with objects called novels at all.

It is certainly true that Bayley is not interested in novels as achieved wholes, shapes carved out of time and experience, for to profess such an interest is the mark of the formalist. His intention is directed to fragments and sudden illuminations; moments which offer some sharp or poignant epiphany of character, and brief

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revelations of the resilient facticity of the world, of which he provides some engaging lists. 'Ransome in *The Shadow Line* with his weak heart; the bottle of quinine that has been filled with sand; Captain MacWhirr and his barometer; the great flake of rust that springs off the bulkhead of the pilgrim ship and persuades Lord Jim that she is sinking—these things have an existence which is not to be got behind.' 'What becomes of Achilles's armour, Alison's arse, Othello's handkerchief, Vronsky's mare, Bloom's kidney?' Such an approach makes one inclined to call John Bayley the Longinus of neo-realist criticism. There is no awareness in his writing that it is at such moments when, as one readily agrees, the novelist seems to offer us the very stuff of life itself, not part of a pre-arranged artifact, that the fictional illusion rises to new heights of epistemological and moral *trompe d'oeil.*

In so far as the novelist must mediate experience to us through words, then we can never touch the stuff of life through him, no matter how intense an illusion we may have of it. The problem of the distance between words and the reality they are supposed to stand for remains as stark as when Wittgenstein wrote the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (whatever direction his subsequent thought may have taken), and it is appropriate that Harry Levin should have used propositions from that work as the epigraph to the final chapter, called 'Realism and Reality', of *The Gates of Horn*, his admirable study of the French realists. To say that a novel is made out of words is not to call it a species of symbolist poem—even if some novelists may be quite happy at such a prospect—for words themselves are made up out of lived human meanings, which is a complementary lesson we may learn from the later Wittgenstein. Yet the gap between words and reality, and the inevitable distortions and refractions that go with it, inevitably remains, though the achievement of the great novelist is to narrow it considerably, and to persuade us that it has disappeared.

These dilemmas spring from a perennial dichotomy. At one extreme is Mr Bayley, wanting the fictional medium to be reduced to a total transparency, through which one may contemplate the excellencies of life itself; at the other extreme is someone like John Barth, who has remarked, 'If you are a novelist of a certain type of temperament, then what you really want to do is reinvent the world. God wasn't too bad a novelist, except he was a Realist.' Since I find Barth's totalitarian aestheticism even more alarming than Bayley's naïve moral realism I suppose that if pressed hard enough I would opt for the latter. But I would strive to avoid such a disastrous choice. To my mind, the tensions between the real world of shared human meanings and experience, and the multitudinous forms of fiction, must be preserved and not allowed to collapse towards either pole.

On particular works and points of interpretation John Bayley is a very much better critic than these stringent comments on his general

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stance might imply, but that stance seems to me so significant, and so representative of a peculiarly English way of looking at literature, that I have allowed myself to discuss it in some detail. In *The Characters of Love*, which is the book I have been most concerned with, Bayley appears as a remarkably ahistorical writer, who is happy to discuss a poem by Chaucer, a play by Shakespeare, and a novel by Henry James in the same context; in *Tolstoy and the Novel*, however, he adopts a different approach and places Tolstoy in the context of nineteenth-century Russian intellectual and literary development, even to the point of being very free with Russian turns of phrase, quoted in the original. Yet although Bayley has a keen and widely-ranging mind, and despite his confessed orientation to life rather than art, his approach is rather narrow. The interest is exclusively literary, quite as much so as that of the aesthetes whom he castigates; one has little sense of the way in which literature is often messily involved with history, politics and the whole spectrum of human behaviour; nor, for that matter, of how it can be subversive as well as reassuring. To say this of John Bayley may be unfair; for if it is true of him, then it is true of most English critics, not excluding the present writer. Bayley's dedication to a Tolstoyan openness to, and acceptance of, experience is very attractive on an ontological plane. Yet it can rather easily be translated into simple complacence. Bayley finds fault with Michel Butor, who claims that the *nouveau roman*, by enabling us to have a new vision of reality, can help us out of that 'profound malaise, the night in which we are all struggling'. Bayley tartly comments that 'any theory of the novel must be crude which starts from the premise that we are all struggling in the night of a profound malaise', and associates it with the baneful influence of socialist realism. But it could be, initially, a conviction about life, not merely a theory of the novel, and if it were, then it could find Christian as well as Marxist ratifications. Life *is* intolerable a great deal of the time, and Keats was not writing as a socialist realist when he said that he would 'reject a petrarchal coronation—on account of my dying day, and because women have cancers'. Michel Butor is certainly wrong if he believes that the *nouveau roman* will give us a new sense of reality; yet he is writing in an established Continental tradition that sees literature as a potentially revolutionary and subversive weapon, as well as an object for contemplation. On the Continent literature is taken with the kind of seriousness that means that writers are, on occasion, persecuted, imprisoned, or even shot, a state of affairs inconceivable in England.

(*To be concluded*)

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