

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09922-6 - Movements in English Literature 1900-1940

Christopher Gillie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Introduction:

The world of art and art in the world: twentieth-century differences

To you literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use . . . I had rather be called a journalist than an artist, that is the essence of it.

H. G. Wells to Henry James (1915)

Meanwhile . . . I hold your distinction between a form that is (like) a painting and a form that is (like) architecture for wholly null and void. There is no sense in which architecture is essentially 'for use' that doesn't leave any other art exactly as much so . . . It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance . . . and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process.

Henry James to H. G. Wells (1915)

James and Wells were novelists, and they were friends, but as these quotations from their letters show, they disagreed about the practice of their art. James longed for a wide readership, but it was unthinkable to him that he should acquire one by compromising in the least degree between the exactingness of his art, which was as demanding as he could conceive it to be, and whatever the public might desire in the way of relaxing amusement. Wells was a novelist almost by accident: he wrote novels because he wanted to speak to as large an audience as he could reach, and novels reached a larger one than any other form of entertainment.

Their dispute makes a useful opening for a study of literature in this century for four reasons. First, it was representative of a deep disagreement near the beginning of the century about the nature and purpose of all art, including literature. Secondly, this disagreement was not merely personal and local in time, but in a degree has continued to divide writers till the present day: in short, it differentiates writers in a typically twentieth-century way. Thirdly, it illustrates something important about the character of English literature, not merely in this century, but in much of its history at least as far back as the beginning of the English novel. Finally, in ways which I will try to explain at the end of the chapter,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09922-6 - Movements in English Literature 1900-1940

Christopher Gillie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE WORLD OF ART AND ART IN THE WORLD

the points of view are worth distinguishing because they help the reader to respond to individual writers who invite the one approach or the other to their work.

It may seem extravagant to base so much on a disagreement between two men who, though they were friends, seem to have been designed by nature for mutual misunderstanding, and who, moreover, had quite different artistic statures. One must begin at least by acknowledging these personal differences, before going on to explore the more impersonal issues.

James was an American from New England; his father had been an abstruse philosopher of great rhetorical power, and his brother, William, was one of the most eminent philosophers of his day. Born to leisure, but imbued with their father's ideals for a lifetime of spiritually lofty and intellectually spacious education of their minds, the brothers were sent to school in America, France, Germany and Switzerland, and Henry then went on a personal exploration of European culture. He admired intensely the most fastidious literary artists of France and Russia – Flaubert and Turgeniev – but he never lost his sense of quite a different criterion: the personal moral integrity which his native country set above any other cultural integrity. In the end he settled in London, moving in sophisticated circles, despising the provinciality of English (as compared to Parisian) taste, but deeply sympathetic to the moral insights of the English (in distinction from the French) fictional tradition.

Wells, an Englishman, was a younger man – born in 1866, some twenty-three years later than James. He was the son of a small trader, became a science teacher in a school, and acquired a science degree at London University. Then, after a discouraging beginning, he achieved a major success in science fiction (*The Time Machine*, 1895) and went on to write a large number of works: more science fiction, novels with a strong autobiographical element set in the lower middle class, huge experiments in popular education (*The Outline of History*, 1920), and polemical works – he joined the socialist Fabian Society in 1903. In fact all his writing might be described as polemical, or at least educational; Wells believed that society must be socially reformed, and that technology would be the great instrument of its reform – an optimism he altogether abandoned at the end of his life. In so far as adjectives can sum up personalities, Wells was extroverted, versatile, bumptious, high-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09922-6 - Movements in English Literature 1900-1940

Christopher Gillie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE WORLD OF ART AND ART IN THE WORLD

spirited, assertive and credulous; James was introverted, dedicated, urbane, sombre, tortuous and sceptical. They shared a deep concern about the human condition, but even that resemblance concealed an enormous disparity. James's material was the human psyche – its elusiveness, rapacity and vulnerability; Wells's interest in human nature was far more physical and environmental. No wonder, as Wells came to see after James's death, they argued at cross-purposes, but the argument was not merely futile. It was on the contrary fertile in that it concerned not the subject of fiction but the treatment of the subject, and beyond that it raised the question of the purpose and nature of art.

For the sake of intelligibility, it is worth outlining how it all began. In 1912 Wells published a novel called *Marriage*, which opens with a young man named Trafford crashing an aeroplane in a garden where, among others, there is a girl named Marjorie Pope. 'Thereupon', recounts Wells in his *Autobiography* (1934) –

there is bandaging, ambulance work and much coming and going and Marjorie . . . falls deeply in love with Trafford. She drives into the village in a donkey cart to do some shopping and meets the lamed Trafford, and their wheels interlock and they fall talking. All that – except for the writing – was tolerable according to James. But then, in order to avoid the traffic in the high road the two young people take their respective donkey carts into a side lane and remain there talking for three hours. And this is where James's objection came in. Of the three hours of intercourse in the lane the novel tells nothing, except that the young people emerged in open and declared love with each other. This, said James, wasn't playing the game. I had cut out the essential after a feast of irrelevant particulars. Gently but firmly he insisted that I did not know myself what had happened . . . that I had not thought out the individualities concerned with sufficient care and thoroughness . . . Henry James was quite right in saying that I had not thought out these two people to the pitch of saturation and that they did not behave unconsciously and naturally. But my defence is that that did not matter, or at least that for the purposes of the book it did not matter very much.

What were 'the purposes of the book'? Wells has already explained that his original assumption as a novelist had been that 'problems of adjustment were the essential matter for novel-writing'. In other words, he seems to have felt that people wanted to read novels, or could profitably read them, in order to receive enlightenment about the complications of their personal lives.

Now there is little doubt that James, so far, was right in the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09922-6 - Movements in English Literature 1900-1940

Christopher Gillie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE WORLD OF ART AND ART IN THE WORLD

argument. For how can a novelist present ‘problems of adjustment’ when he admits that the characters whose problems are to be adjusted have not been fully thought out? Leaving aside the huge questions whether any significant personal problem can ever be ‘adjusted’, and whether, if it can, there is not an even greater problem in deciding the implications for general living of such a delicate process, Wells is clearly failing to understand that unthought-out characters cannot realistically *have* problems. This is where we come against the difficulty that James and Wells were, as novelists, not merely of different kinds but of different statures. The argument is between James, a major novelist, and Wells, a very talented minor novelist: between a professional who understands his job very well indeed, and an amateur who doesn’t fully understand it. But the argument has a deeper level, which is suggested by Wells’s complaint, in his autobiography, that James had no idea that a novel could be an aid to conduct. This raises a disagreement which had been maturing between schools of thought over the previous half century, though irregularly, without a consistent front between the parties.

Hebraism and hellenism: conscience and consciousness

In 1869, the critic Matthew Arnold published his influential book *Culture and Anarchy*. In this he distinguished two basic attitudes of mind, one of which sought to pursue morally effective action, disregarding enlightenment of the mind, and the other sought intellectual enlightenment, in indifference to practical conduct. Because the former is ethical and nourished by Bible-inspired protestantism, he related it to the ancient Hebrews and called it hebraism; because the latter is cultural, he derived it from the aesthetic and philosophical achievements of ancient Greece and called it hellenism. A healthy society requires both, for if concern for ideas without concern for practice is plainly absurd, it is equally true that a nation guided merely by its conscience will not be in a position to know whether its conscience is properly educated. This he considered to be the case with the British. If he was right, they were clearly in a serious case, for he typified their cultural attitudes as those of ‘barbarians’ (upper classes) who preferred the culture of the body to that of the mind, the ‘philistines’ (the middle classes) who were indifferent to either, and the ‘populace’ (all the rest)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09922-6 - Movements in English Literature 1900-1940

Christopher Gillie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

HEBRAISM AND HELLENISM

who were ignorant of both. What the British, in Arnold's opinion, needed was education in that nobility of spirit whose embodiment was high art, and especially the art of poetry at its greatest – in Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton. Poetry, he predicted, would replace religion as the source of those spiritual qualities without which any civilisation must lapse into squalor. In his essay 'The Study of Poetry' (1888) he maintained that the best poetry operates as a touchstone of truth and hence as 'a criticism of life' – a test by which the truthfulness and depth of the emotions governing conduct can be judged.

It is plain that Arnold never contemplated the divorce of art from life; quite on the contrary, he complained that high art did not have the centrality which it ought to have in the life of society. All the same, he makes a special claim for poetry as offering an unique function, and recommends a conscious reverence for the poetic medium:

For in poetry the distinction between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half true, is of paramount importance. It is of paramount importance because of the high destinies of poetry. In poetry, as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, we have said, as time goes on and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay.

Such reverence for an artistic medium tends to make the artists who practise it into a kind of priestly caste, and a 'priesthood' of art is just what one does find emerging among a number of artistic cults in the second half of the century. Arnold did not father them; it was his intention to change the attitude of society towards art rather than to change that of artists towards society. Nevertheless, his was among a number of influences tending in the same direction: the writings of Ruskin the art critic and of Pater the scholar of the Renaissance were others. The tendency had already shown itself in the mid-century group of poets and painters, together with those affiliated to them, who called themselves Pre-Raphaelites. At the end of the century, more extremely and wantonly, it was evident in the Aesthetic Movement whose leader was Oscar Wilde. He wrote in *The Decay of Lying* (1889): 'Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as thought has, and develops purely on its own lines.' This was not what Arnold meant at all, and yet Wilde also was defying the philistines.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09922-6 - Movements in English Literature 1900-1940

Christopher Gillie

Excerpt

[More information](#)**THE WORLD OF ART AND ART IN THE WORLD**

It was just the priestliness of the artist, this extreme reverence for the medium in which he worked, which Wells disliked in James. In his autobiography Wells explained it thus:

He had no possible use of the novel as a help to conduct. His mind was turned away from any such idea. From his point of view there were not so much novels as The Novel, and it was a very high and important achievement. He thought of it as an Art Form and of novelists as artists of a very special and exalted type. He was concerned with their greatness and repute. He saw us all as Masters or would-be Masters, little Masters and great Masters, and he was plainly sorry that 'Cher Maître' was not an English expression. One could not be in a room with him for ten minutes without realising the importance he attached to this dignity of his. I was by nature and education unsympathetic with this mental disposition. But I was disposed to regard a novel as about as much an art form as a market place or a boulevard. It had not even necessarily to get anywhere. You went by it on your various occasions.

There is some justice in these remarks, but we would be misled and unjust to James if we suppose Wells to mean that James cared nothing for moral insights. Far from this, James, the New Englander with a long puritan tradition behind him, continued to believe that moral insight is central to art as to life. But James would have thought it presumptuous to offer a novel 'as a help to conduct'. He believed in the art of the novel as Arnold believed in the art of poetry: as a touchstone of truth and a 'criticism of life', and he believed that it could be this just because it is separate from life, for 'Literature is an objective, a projected result; it is life that is the unconscious, the agitated, the struggling, floundering cause' (essay on Balzac). Wells, on the other hand, rejected this separation of art from life, although he did come to feel that his argument with James presented him with a real dilemma. It is a dilemma which his contemporary Bernard Shaw summed up in connection with the drama. Writing of Ibsen's controversial play about the status of woman in marriage and society, Shaw said: '*A Doll's House* will be as flat as ditchwater when *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is as fresh as paint; but it will have done more work in the world; and that is enough for the highest genius.'

With these three writers in mind, it is tempting to distinguish their approaches as those of the artist and the journalist. James, certainly, insisted on the title of artist, just as Wells preferred that of journalist, and Shaw recovered English drama from its long apathy by making it into a new kind of journalistic vehicle. The

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09922-6 - Movements in English Literature 1900-1940

Christopher Gillie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE ENGLISH NOVEL: A SPECIAL CASE

distinction, however, between art and journalism is much more treacherous than it is often taken to be, and some discussion of their relationship is relevant to our subject. For not only has the English novel in its past history commonly been associated with journalism, but the two kinds of writing were closely connected in their very origins.

The English novel: a special case

A strange feature of Arnold's campaign for cultural revival was that he ignored – or almost ignored – the novel. That he should have ignored contemporary drama was understandable: there had been no major English drama since the early part of the seventeenth century; but when we now look back at the literature of Victorian England, it is the novels of Dickens and George Eliot, not to mention important lesser figures, which impress us as its major achievement. Yet he was not alone in this obliviousness; the philosopher, John Stuart Mill, for instance, whose life had been changed by the poetry of Wordsworth, despised prose fiction, and no major critic gave the art of the novel serious attention until Henry James himself, in his essay 'The Art of Fiction' (1884).

The explanation for this neglect seems to lie in the history of English culture as far back as the impact on it of the Renaissance in the sixteenth century. The word 'renaissance' means rebirth, and it was used by men of that century themselves to express their conviction that they had recovered the very spirit of ancient Greece and Rome in their own art and scholarship. But the Renaissance really meant more than this: the men of the period really believed – or acted as if they believed – that they had discovered the meaning of 'civilisation'. In their feeling, the long centuries that lay between themselves and ancient Rome were a protracted interlude, the 'Middle Ages' as they were the first to call them. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, western Europeans lived in this faith that what the ancient Greeks and Romans and the men of the Renaissance believed to be civilisation was civilisation indeed; that loss of that particular vision meant relapse into barbarism. It is true that by the second quarter of the nineteenth century the English underwent a partial change of heart: gothic, not classicism, gave them imaginative excitement. But this was a change which chiefly affected the visual arts, especially architecture. Although

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09922-6 - Movements in English Literature 1900-1940

Christopher Gillie

Excerpt

[More information](#)**THE WORLD OF ART AND ART IN THE WORLD**

medieval subjects had a strong appeal for nineteenth-century poets, the spirit of intellectual culture was still classical.

However the Renaissance spirit, although it spread widely among western nations, was primarily a scholarly and an aristocratic movement; as C. S. Lewis has said, it caused education to spread *upwards* through society. The literary arts cultivated by the Greeks and Romans – above all rhetoric, poetry and the poetic drama – became the culture of these upper classes and of the more learned of the middle classes. On the other hand the commercial middle classes (and those below them) were far less penetrated by the Renaissance spirit, and far more influenced by the religious movement of the Reformation which reached Britain at about the same time. Thus that large section of society was much more affected by the translated Bible than it was by Virgil and Seneca; indeed a strong section of them was suspicious of all secular forms of literature, especially any sort of fiction.

Nevertheless it was from these classes that English prose fiction, what we nowadays recognise as the novel, took its rise. They were inclined at first to distrust even the religious allegories of John Bunyan (1628–88), and still more the secular tales of Daniel Defoe (1660–1731) – both men from the middle class – but they came to treasure them, for the first dealt in true doctrine as they understood it, and the second with the workaday facts of minute texture such as composed the web of their lives. These proto-novelists were succeeded by a writer from the same class, who has often been designated the first true novelist – Samuel Richardson (1689–1761), who used fiction to preach the kind of morality which his class deeply approved. Certainly there were other kinds of novelist, for instance Henry Fielding (1707–54) who would have nothing to do with Richardson's ethics; but novels, although their readership quickly extended far outside any particular social periphery, basically retained their strongly middle-class characteristics of truth to daily fact and affirmation of middle-class (not necessarily mean, illiberal, or superficial) human and ethical values.

And yet, to nineteenth-century men of culture – the culture of the Renaissance through the 'public' schools – the novel was still felt to be an intruder on the cultural scene. Its matter and manner were tainted with what seemed to be the ephemerality of current events. To suppose that journalism is necessarily ephemeral is a mistake, but to see a connection between the novel and journalism

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09922-6 - Movements in English Literature 1900-1940

Christopher Gillie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE ENGLISH NOVEL: A SPECIAL CASE

was correct. Defoe, one of the earliest novelists in the modern sense, was also one of the first modern journalists, and in his work the two kinds of writing overlap. Some of his best fictions, for instance *A Journal of the Plague Year*, were reconstructions made to resemble a journalistic account by an eye-witness. Thereafter, although there were many different sorts of novel and some of them improbable and even fantastic narrations, the conscience of the best novelists had resembled the conscience of the best journalists, dictating an imaginative image of current social fact. When Arnold sought for his touchstones of truth, he did not think of looking for them in novels, for no novelist could, or even desired to, epitomise the permanent truths of human experience disentangled from specific social predicaments, as great poets had done.

How, then, did it come about that, by the end of the century, Henry James could make such exalted claims for the novel as high art? A clue to the understanding of this paradox is that James did not consider *English* novels, as they existed up to his time, to exemplify the disciplines and the scope which he considered due to high art. In a lecture delivered in 1905, he deprecates English novelistic indiscipline to his American audience in the following terms:

I do not propose for a moment to invite you to blink the fact that our huge Anglo-Saxon array of producers and readers . . . presents production uncontrolled, production untouched by criticism, unguided, unlighted, uninstructed, unashamed, on a scale that is really a new thing in the world.

James makes these remarks by way of introducing his subject, the French novelist Balzac, and it was to the French school that James had apprenticed himself in his youth. It is at least arguable that James greatly exaggerated the superiority of French novelists over British ones in their care for artistic form; if he did so, it was because the French tradition, more aristocratic in its origins than the English tradition had been, had cultivated a form that was closer to the Renaissance ideal, the ideal of western European culture which fascinated him so strongly.

James turned away from the French for a reason that he gives in his review of Zola's *Nana*:

This is what saves us in England, in spite of our artistic levity and the presence of the young ladies – this fact that we are by disposition better psychologists, that we have, as a general thing, a deeper, more delicate perception of the play of character and the state of the soul.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09922-6 - Movements in English Literature 1900-1940

Christopher Gillie

Excerpt

[More information](#)**THE WORLD OF ART AND ART IN THE WORLD**

But it seems that he never fully considered what it was in the form of the English novel (since it had one of some sort) that gave it this greater freedom. The English novelist began with ‘a something to say’ – a theme more or less strongly felt according to his seriousness and capacity – and then allowed the theme to generate its own growth. The result, if his imagination was too weak or the theme too casually felt, might be triviality or confusion – just the sort of confusion which James thought characteristic of life and alien to art, and which he found in Bennett’s *Clayhanger* (1910) and *Hilda Lessways* (1911): ‘A huge and in its way a varied aggregation, without traceable lines, divivable direction, effect of composition . . .’ But if the novelist were a genius and fully engaged, the novel might achieve its own consistency while unfolding into great amplitude. One might call this – to evoke one of its finest practitioners – the Dickens method. The James method – and he remained aesthetically a disciple of the French – began with contemplation of a selected theme and proceeded by exclusion of irrelevancies and concentration on essentials. The Dickens method was from the spontaneous emergence of the theme to its fullest amplification by a generous welcome to contingent material.

I have called this ‘the Dickens method’ and not ‘the Wells method’, because Wells is too small a novelist to set up against James. But a younger novelist than either was beginning to establish himself when the Wells–James dispute was at its height: this was D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930). He is now seen to have been one of the greatest English novelists, and he belonged to the English tradition in the sense that James deplored as well as in the sense which he admired.

D. H. Lawrence and the book of life

Lawrence, the miner’s son, belonged to the great Nonconformist tradition of English literature; the tradition which had from the start been suspicious of the classical Renaissance and its civilisation, who did not attend the great public schools to receive a classical education, who were the spiritual core of Arnold’s philistines, although often much less uncultured than he made them out to be. Although lately they had read much else, for generations their chief literature had been the English Bible, which for them had