

## Editor's introduction

The bulk of this volume – eight out of eleven chapters – consists of essays published for the first time. They are essays that Q. D. Leavis had been working on in the last few years of her life. Many of them had not been completed for publication when she died; some are only drafts. In the last years she was busy tackling a number of themes – themes to which she was drawn by virtue of her absorbing interest in the Victorian novel, and to which, after *Scrutiny* had ceased publication, she could devote more of her time and research. What particularly interested her is what she considered to be the ‘neglected aspects’ of the Victorian novel – such as the novel of religious controversy (which is the longest chapter in the volume), the Anglo-Irish novel, the women writers of the nineteenth century and certain aspects of George Eliot’s work. These themes afforded Q. D. Leavis a wide scope for exercising her powers both as a literary historian and as a critic with a sociological approach to literature. Such an approach brought within the purview of her analytically inquisitive eye such data as ‘social attitudes, instinctive behaviour, physical appearance and health, style of speech, way of living, dress, deportment, emotional habits – the whole idiom of life’. Hence on what was, in *Scrutiny* days, a new and pioneering approach to the novel, Q. D. Leavis brought to bear a vast and varied reading, an extraordinary critical acumen, and a vivaciously lucid and vigorous style. This volume is therefore an eloquent testimony to her triple distinction – a critic of the novel, a cultural and sociological historian, and a reviewer, all at their most mature and impressive.

In her essay on the novel of what Mrs Humphry Ward called ‘that great controversy’, between Protestantism and

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Excerpt

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Catholicism, Q. D. Leavis cogently demonstrates how practically all Victorian novelists, major and minor, were very much alive to and more or less directly involved in the religious topics and controversies of the day, how they responded to them, and what impact their response and involvement had on their writings. She cites contemporary theologians, divines, politicians and intellectuals as well as the novelists and writers themselves. For instance, she points out how the novels of Mrs Gaskell, Mrs Oliphant and Charlotte Yonge deal with what was regarded in the Victorian age as 'the curious helplessness in the face of Catholicism', the 'deep-down feeling of the pull of Catholicism against all reason and English habit' – a subject Q. D. Leavis considered peculiarly suited for the novelist, for it can only be treated 'outside the field of controversy, by a sympathetic study of feelings and impulses and early environment'.

As to the religious situation in Victorian Ireland, Q. D. Leavis found it 'simpler but certainly not less impassioned, since politics and class were in that unhappy country inevitably mixed up with the Catholic-Protestant dualism'; and the literature of religious controversy was, therefore, 'more clear-cut and so more spirited, and, on the Roman Catholic side, much bitterer than in England'. This accounts for 'livelier, if not better' novels in Ireland, which, she thought, were of considerable interest to the student of social history, and also to the student of literature because of the Anglo-Irish idiom and vocabulary. In fact some of Q. D. Leavis's most penetrating criticism is to be found in the chapter on the Anglo-Irish novel, where her composite interests and approaches (sociological, historical and literary) combine to offer her an ideal context and platform. But underlying and giving direction to all these interests and approaches was Q. D. Leavis's overriding concern – viz. that of critically weighing and assessing the literary and artistic worth of the Anglo-Irish novels and distinguishing a work of art from 'a merely ephemeral novel'.

One of the plans Q. D. Leavis had in mind for some years before her death was to write a book on the women writers of the nineteenth century. The essay included in this volume, 'Women writers of the nineteenth century', outlines, with

some illuminating autobiographical glimpses and reflections, what that plan, had it materialized, would have amounted to. The essays on Jane Austen, George Eliot and the Brontë sisters (included in *The Englishness of the English Novel*) were to have been the backbone of the book. In her two essays on Mrs Oliphant included here – ‘*Miss Marjoribanks*’ and ‘*Autobiography*’ – Q. D. Leavis assigns to Mrs Oliphant the role of bridging the gap between Jane Austen and George Eliot; and argues how Lucilla, the protagonist of *Miss Marjoribanks*, is ‘a triumphant intermediary between Emma and Dorothea, and, incidentally, more entertaining, more impressive and more likeable than either’.

‘The development of character in George Eliot’s novels’ and ‘Literary values and the novel’ are both texts of talks Q. D. Leavis gave in the seventies at various grammar schools. Hence they are expository in intention and character. And yet there are valuable critical insights offered in the course of these talks that justify their inclusion in this volume. Tracing George Eliot’s interest in religious sects – as elaborated in the appendix ‘George Eliot and the novel of religious controversy’ – as something deep-rooted in her own religious history, Q. D. Leavis argues how, under Wordsworth’s influence, she managed to retain ‘religious feelings without a theological orthodoxy’, and combined ‘the Wordsworthian religion of nature with compassion for all, particularly . . . those ill-used by nature and society’. As to the relation between George Eliot and ‘the necessary public taste for and ability to appreciate the serious novel’, it was, Q. D. Leavis points out, Dickens who created a serious reading public for the novel which George Eliot, as a late starter, inherited. Another important thing she inherited was Shakespeare’s use of an art form in prose which would be the ‘equivalent of the great dramatic art in verse’.

In ‘Literary values and the novel’ Q. D. Leavis distinguishes between a novel that comes direct from the raw material of a novelist’s own life, so that it is ‘only a piece of autobiography’ and has ‘no real form, no objectivity, no general application, and cannot offer value judgements’; and a novel that possesses all these qualities. She refers to Wordsworth’s view on Burns’s less decorous poems, and points out how, even though they have no moral intention,

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they have a moral effect, and points out how this is true of all good literature, for no artist can create in a moral vacuum or 'shut out from his works the values he lives by'. She quotes with whole-hearted approval Henry James's view that the value of a work of art is determined by the quality of the mind of the writer.

Q. D. Leavis's early essay 'Leslie Stephen: Cambridge critic', more than any other in this volume, while summing up the ethos and quality of Stephen's criticism and critical outlook, sums up also that of Q. D. Leavis's own criticism. In fact, Stephen was an important formative influence on Q. D. Leavis – especially with regard to her notion of literature as 'a product of the interplay between the writer and the reader, a collaboration between them'. The essay therefore embodies not only the ethos of Stephen's criticism and critical outlook, but also that of Q. D. Leavis herself.

One – perhaps the most telling – way through which *Scrutiny* made its immediate impact was in the severity of its reviews, Q. D. Leavis's own reviews, so trenchant and drastic, offered penetrating analyses of and first-hand evaluative judgements on what was under review. Not only was a review by her an exercise in literary criticism of the first order, but it also epitomized the *Scrutiny* ethos as well as the aims and directions of modern criticism. A model of the most exacting kind of critical criteria disinterestedly applied, her best reviews still have an edge, a vitality and a relevance which some of the books and authors she reviewed have lost, and one still goes to them, as she herself said of Jane Austen's novels, 'to be alerted and braced'.

G. SINGH



## Mrs Inchbald: *A Simple Story*

Mrs Inchbald (born 1753) came of a Catholic family, married a co-religionist, and in later life became devout. Yet her novel (sketched in 1777, written in 1790) is not propaganda, for she holds the balance fairly and evenly between her Protestant heroine, the lovely and vivacious Miss Milner, and her dignified guardian, a Catholic priest, Dorriforth. And though after true love has eventually conquered their religious disparity the marriage breaks down, this is on usual novelistic grounds (years of absence of the husband leading to the wife's seduction by a former suitor) and is not explicitly laid at the door of Protestantism, as it easily might have been. After the consequent separation, the erring cast-off wife is shown repentant and, tended in her loneliness by her husband's director who comforts (but not converts) her before her death, she even compares favourably with Dorriforth, whose domestic disaster has made him now turn to his religion for consolation but rendered him arbitrary, implacable, and tyrannical. *A Simple Story* is thus a powerful novel of considerable merit as a work of art. One cannot help reflecting that if written after the first quarter of the next century it would have been very different, and unlikely to have been a work of art in any case.

The opening sentence of this novel is remarkable in its eighteenth-century version of Roman Catholicism, where even in a priest the religion is subordinated to the eighteenth-century philosophic idea of virtue:

Dorriforth, bred at St Omer's in all the scholastic rigour of that college, was, by education, and the solemn vows of his order, a Roman Catholic priest – but nicely discriminating between the philosophical and the superstitious part of that character, and adopting the former only, he possessed qualities not unworthy of

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the first professors of Christianity . . . He refused to shelter himself from the temptations of the layman by the walls of a cloister, but sought for, and found that shelter in the centre of London, where he dwelt, in his own prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance.

No doubt the ‘superstitious’ was in deference to a Protestant readership, this being the eighteenth century, when ‘superstition’ was the ground for rejecting Roman Catholicism; and the assurance that it was possible to be a Catholic and moreover a priest, without subscribing to what for Protestants was the objectionable aspect of that religion, was defensive. Mr Milner, an old friend of the younger Dorriforth, was also a Catholic, but ‘on his marriage with a lady of Protestant tenets, they mutually agreed their sons should be educated in the religious opinion of their father, and the daughters in that of their mother’. This curious compromise was not invented for fictional purposes; there is a great deal of evidence both in fiction and fact for its being a custom in different countries until the later nineteenth century; and in Germany it was a legal enactment, where, as George Eliot discovered to her surprise, it worked well.

Thus Dorriforth at thirty, when Mr Milner has died leaving him guardian to his daughter, finds himself obliged to receive as inmate into the house where he resides with a Catholic family as housekeeper, a heretic, a rich heiress of eighteen, who having had only a Protestant boarding-school education is impulsive, coquettish, and unquenchably witty in conversation, as well as being a beauty. ‘Her replies had all the effect of repartee’, and she never fails in repartee, even to the Jesuit tutor of the family of the Earl of Elmwood, to which Dorriforth belongs. Sandford naturally detests her, and achieves a relationship designed to humiliate by slighting her. He openly compares her to her disadvantage with a pattern young Catholic lady, Miss Fenton, whom the young Earl of Elmwood is directed to marry. The running battle between Miss Milner and the Jesuit is both amusing and painful, and our sympathy is generally engaged on her behalf, compared with whom Miss Fenton appears colourless, and merely conventionally virtuous, while Miss Milner with all her faults is interesting in her strength of feeling, her honesty and her dauntless refusal to submit to any authority but her

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guardian's. Her love of gaiety and of keeping suitors about her is distressing to poor Dorriforth; he tries to get her to accept some one of them so as to have her off his hands. He is embarrassed at having constantly to defend her against his friend Sandford, whose harshness and deliberate provocation amount at times to cruelty to his ward, though he has from habit to treat Sandford with respect and deference.

Miss Milner refuses to marry, and confides to her (Catholic) confidante that it is because she has fallen in love with her guardian. The horror of the confidante, the misery of the heroine, the necessity to deceive Dorriforth and to separate from him by a long visit to friends, is managed without a false note. Lord Elmwood dies and Dorriforth, succeeding to the title, is absolved from his vows, so that an ancient Catholic family may not die out. Miss Milner's natural hopes of winning his love are soon dashed by the news that he has been instructed to marry the model beauty Miss Fenton, to whom one Lord Elmwood is as acceptable a match as the other: she has no feelings in that or any other matter inconsistent with the rigorous religious education she has received, while Miss Milner is a prey to feelings of real distress, passion and despair. The Protestant and Catholic characters of the various personages in the novel are consistent, and the drama lies in their inevitable conflict. The author has no recourse to melodrama or sentimentality, working like Jane Austen, her successor, in delicate shades of feeling and slight everyday actions that, though minimal, in their context have significance and convey a whole inner drama. In fact, Mrs Inchbald, having bolder psychological matter to analyse and deeper conflicts to explore, has created a novel superior to *Pride and Prejudice* in interest and not less witty, or rich in memorable scenes. Like *Pride and Prejudice*, *A Simple Story* is written mainly in dramatic form (Mrs Inchbald was an actress and dramatist), interspersed where necessary by brief authorial comment.

The confidante now behaves with unusual sense for a character in a novel: she intimates delicately to the new Lord Elmwood that his ward's alarming state of health is due to her desperate love for himself. Knowing Miss Fenton's disposition he has no hesitation in breaking his engagement, and finds that even this is welcome to her as she would be

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able now to retire from the world into a convent – ‘Her brother, on whom her fortune devolved if she took this resolution, was exactly of her opinion.’ He then becomes Miss Milner’s professed lover, in spite of his tutor’s opposition. We now have a series of surprises. Miss Milner cannot but treat the former Dorriforth as a lover, to whom she is exacting, capricious and rebellious. Sandforth sees the possibilities of the situation and exploits them to sunder the lovers, for Lord Elmwood’s character, formed in another convention from society’s, will not tolerate such treatment. After a decisive battle of wills he breaks with her, and arranges to travel abroad with Sandford. Miss Milner had never for a moment expected such an issue, confident in her powers of keeping him at her feet however ill-used, and her agonies of remorse, though concealed from Lord Elmwood, are visible to Sandford, who shows slight signs of discomfort at his achievement, though trying to rejoice. Miss Milner had always recovered her good humour after each conflict with him in the past, and at times shown herself to be magnanimous, in contrast to his surly enmity; and to her surprise he begins to show her small kindnesses and to deny that he bears her any ill-will, even inviting her to the last breakfast, finding that neither she nor his pupil have been to bed that night and are in equal agony. Here, having observed their wretchedness and aware that it is his responsibility as much as Miss Milner’s, he explains that he thought he was acting for the best in saving them from ‘the worst of misfortunes, conjugal strife’ – ‘But though old, and a priest, I can submit to think I have been in error’, and he marries them on the spot. As no ring had been provided, the bridegroom marries her with a ring from his own finger. They then perceive it was a mourning ring. On this ominous note the second volume closes.

Mrs Inchbald had found a subject that was to be a central one for the next century’s novel of religious controversy, for in the mixed marriage and the conflicts leading up to it, the radical contrast between Protestant and Catholic could be expressed, studied and worked out to its tragic conclusion, or some plausible compromise found. Essentially a subject not for the theologian but for the psychologist and sociologist, it lends itself ideally to the novelist’s purposes as radically



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serious and important; the psychology and social conditioning of characters in conflict in a typical situation is a subject which the novelist, with his insight and unbiassed sympathies, is uniquely qualified to represent and explore. And this sentiment entails exposing basic ideas about the conduct of life and the formation of character, as well as showing their results in representative action, with the emotional consequences.

Mrs Inchbald had already discovered the conditions on which alone the subject could be made into a serious work of art. She is impartial; she always goes below externals and appearances to show the causes and the realities; she has firmly defined characters who respond individually but according to their natures and religious conditioning; and though she employs some stylization of speech, yet the elegance of educated speech at that date, and the prevalently witty tone it employed, makes it a flexible and entertaining medium. The novel is full of genuinely moving situations and the range of characters, where so few are employed, is remarkable. The eighteenth-century's realism, with its disillusionment as to human character, so noticeable in Fielding, Dr Johnson and Jane Austen (to mention some very different exponents of this trait) is one of Mrs Inchbald's assets. Thus, when Sandford mentions a headache after he has had a snub from his pupil about his abuse of Miss Milner, she, who never bore malice, good-naturedly fetches him her own 'specific for the headache' so that 'with all his churlishness, he could not refuse taking it': 'This was but a commonplace civility, such as is paid by one enemy to another every day; but the *manner* was the material part.' It pleases Dorriforth, who had been provoked previously, and 'Even Sandford was not insensible to her behaviour, and in return, when he left the room, "Wished her a good night".' This from him was a great concession. And on a later occasion, when she is in distress and he has been profiting by it, he is disconcerted by being asked innocently by her friend if he has any of the drops left that Miss Milner gave him for the headache, Miss Milner being disabled by hers; he is obliged to say he used them all, but the recollection of her kindness 'somewhat embarrassed him'; and after she has gone to bed and he is alone with his friend he is inhibited from making unkind

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insinuations at her expense, as he had intended. It is with such slight everyday events and actions that this novelist works so successfully, using them as indications of attitudes and changes of feeling and individualities of character, building them up to power the larger events of the novel.

Though the differences in Protestant and Catholic education and values are stressed, there is absolutely no emotion on the novelist's part in treating them, no bias in exhibiting the character of either religion's representatives, and no feeling is aroused in the reader towards either religion as such. This is so unthinkable in any nineteenth-century novel on the same theme, or in this field at all, that we might have supposed, if we had read *only* the nineteenth-century novels of religious controversy, that it represents an unattainable ideal. Yet it is in line, as we have seen, with the attitudes of Catholic and Protestant writers, whether novelist, critic or theologian, in the calmer waters of the century before the Victorians arrived to change all that. It is in fact these latter who are abnormal. The conditions that brought about this abnormality, the inflamed religious attitudes that produced novels of passionate feelings (on the novelist's part) with their denunciations, stock characters and vituperations, will be examined in the following chapter. I shall here mention as the characteristic Victorian opposite of *A Simple Story* the case of the novels of a typical Catholic convert of the Victorian age, Monsignor Hugh Benson. A biographer of his family (Miss Betty Askwith) wrote:

His work was marred by its passionate propaganda element. In his historical novels the martyrs are all on one side. In his contemporary ones all the Protestants, particularly the Anglican vicars, are hidebound, snobbish, reactionary and hypocritical, while the Catholics are spiritual, humble-minded and understanding [and all described in] the flood of somewhat second-hand purplish prose.

It is true that Father Martindale, Monsignor Benson's biographer, had a higher opinion of these novels, and probably their only effect was to bring comfort to Roman Catholics, who suffered a good deal at the hands of Victorian novelists of the opposite persuasion, whose novels were not much better than Hugh Benson's. Neither class can aspire to