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Edited by Adrian Poole

Excerpt

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ADRIAN POOLE

Introduction

In 1706 Daniel Defoe was spying in Scotland. A year before the Union of England and Scotland, he wrote to his employer, Robert Harley, Queen Anne's Secretary of State, from Edinburgh:

I have faithfull Emissaries in Every Company And I Talk to Everybody in Their Own way ... With the Glasgow Mutineers I am to be a fish Merchant, with the Aberdeen Men a woollen and with the Perth and western men a Linen Manufacturer, and still at the End of all Discourse the Union is the Essentiall and I am all to Every one that I may Gain some.¹

Let us hope that Harley was amused as well as informed.

'I Talk to Everybody in Their Own way' – and everybody talks to me. This is good training for a writer of some sort, a dramatist perhaps and a journalist certainly. Not that Defoe was a novice: born in 1660, he was in his mid-forties, author of satirical poems and pamphlets including *The True-Born Englishman* and *The Shortest Way with Dissenters* (the latter landed him in jail). But a new – and safer – kind of writer was about to emerge. While the word 'novel' had been available throughout the seventeenth century to describe certain kinds of stories in print, especially in its later decades, the idea of 'the novelist' was about to leap into existence. The first date recorded by the *OED* of the word for an author of novels is 1728. The phenomenal success of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) had something to do with this.

Defoe boasts of his skills as an impersonator who can dance into people's confidence. Yet he could have been lying in bed and making the whole thing up. Did Robert Harley wonder whose side this secret agent was on? How could he be trusted? A hundred and fifty years or so later, one of Defoe's most brilliant successors, well trained as a journalist to listen to everybody in their own way, creates a character of whom it is said: 'He do the Police in different voices.'² Charles Dickens could do more than the police in different voices. Like Defoe, he could do outcasts, deviants, criminals, and their

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victims, all up and down the social scale, a seemingly unending performance. Whose side was *he* on?

In the novel with which Graham Greene's career began to take off, *Stamboul Train* (1932), a frantic female journalist pounces on a best-selling author named Mr Quin Savory and lures him into pompous fatuities. His views on modern literature – Joyce, Lawrence – for example: 'It will pass', he opines. As for himself:

'I'm not a poet. A poet's an individualist. He can dress as he likes; he depends only on himself. A novelist depends on other men; he's an average man with the power of expression. 'E's a spy,' Mr Savory added with confusing drama, dropping aitches right and left. 'E 'as to see everything and pass unnoticed. If people recognized 'im they wouldn't talk, they'd pose before 'im; 'e wouldn't find things out.'³

Greene is having fun at someone's expense – the novelist J. B. Priestley thought it was his. Mr Savory is not showing off to his interlocutor as brilliantly as Defoe to Harley or Dickens to his readers. He affects a more modest idea of the writer as nondescript, nearly anonymous, going about his business 'finding things out'. Yet however banal this way of putting it, there is a humdrum truth to the idea that a novelist depends on other men (and women) and tries to find things out. Greene, all his aitches in place, would sign up to it with zest and develop it with a good deal more verve (though no less success) than poor commonplace Mr Savory.

Not all twenty-seven novelists featured in this volume of essays led or depicted such adventurous lives as Defoe, Dickens, and Greene, out and about, on the road, at risk. Some preferred being around the house, not always their own, listening to gossip, to plots and plans about property, belongings, and dwellings, musing like Elizabeth Bennet that to be mistress of Pemberley, or wherever, might be something. More feminine interests, perhaps? But it would be wrong to gender this distinction between two kinds of novelist too neatly, or indeed to hold it too firmly at all. One of the contentions emerging from these essays is that novelists enjoy challenging distinctions of all kinds, between resident and vagrant, in-law and out-law, master and servant, domestic and exotic, loyalist and renegade, and so on. Outcasts and exiles are not always willing and male, as the creators of Clarissa Harlowe, Jane Eyre, and Tess Durbeyfield will testify, and even the most enthusiastic fugitive must find the occasional bed for the night. Novels have always been as interested in finding good lodgings as in taking long journeys, just as, to speak more largely, they have been no less intrigued and alarmed by the prospect of settlement, union, and closure, than appalled and excited by that of secession, divorce, and unending flight.

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Nevertheless there is, up until the modernists among whom such distinctions more frankly collapse, a certain opposition between novelists who work mainly on the outside, as it were – Defoe, Fielding, Scott, Dickens, Stevenson – and those who dwell on the inside – Richardson, Burney, Austen, Eliot, James. Like all such distinctions, including that hoary old one between ‘romance’ and ‘realism’, this is too simple. Yet Scott recognised that the kind of fiction at which Jane Austen excelled with its ‘minute fidelity of detail’ (his phrase) was quite distinct from his own,⁴ and George Eliot aspired to write novels radically different from Dickens’s. Eliot was the first, so D. H. Lawrence thought, to ‘put the action inside’.⁵ An overstatement to be sure, but also a way of recognising that after Eliot, her successors would be more sharply uncertain where the action was – Forster and Woolf and Bowen, and even more drastically the Joyce of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, the Golding of *The Inheritors* and *Pincher Martin*. Yet back in the eighteenth century this had also been true of Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, that endless hopeless search, no less comical than tragical, for ‘the action’.

Henry James memorably expressed the conviction that to render in words what goes on inside can be no less gripping than the most rampant adventure. He is reflecting here with pride on the chapter in his early masterpiece, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), ‘the extraordinary meditative vigil’, when his protagonist sits and thinks late at night by a dying fire. It shows, James says,

what an ‘exciting’ inward life may do for the person leading it even while it remains perfectly normal ... It is a representation simply of her motionlessly *seeing*, and an attempt withal to make the mere still lucidity of her act as ‘interesting’ as the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate.⁶

A quarter of a century separates James’s comments from his first rendering of Isabel Archer; they are from the Preface to the revised version in the New York Edition of 1907–9. The intervening years had in fact seen an efflorescence of fiction involving caravans and pirates, spies, secret agents, anarchists, revolutionaries, all kinds of excitement in jungles at the margins of empire and back in its heart, the metropolis. Novelists cannot manage without violence of some sort, public or private, physical or verbal or psychological, the rape in *Clarissa*, the bomb-blast in Conrad’s *Secret Agent*, Emma’s rudeness to Miss Bates, or whatever happens to Adela Quested in Forster’s *Marabar Caves*. And Gilbert Osmond’s quiet torture of Isabel Archer.

Whatever form it takes, violence blows things and people apart, obliterating distinctions between them. Loyalties are hastily, fervently mustered. By the last page of James’s *Portrait*, it is reasonably clear who has been loyal to Isabel and who has betrayed her. In this respect it resembles most of the

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preceding novels discussed in this volume – novels that take their last stand, as it seems, on issues of personal loyalty. Defoe wrote to Harley: ‘still at the End of all Discourse the Union is the Essentiall’. A great many English novels would go on to pledge their support for ‘the Union’ of suitable partners, usually a man and a woman and with luck some surrounding supporters. Though there are flagrantly tragic exceptions, such as *Wuthering Heights*, and most of the novels by James’s contemporary, Thomas Hardy, such unions remain, up until the later decades of the nineteenth century, a prime form of narrative closure. Yet the confidence with which the union is achieved is rarely unshadowed by doubts, regrets, guilts, anxieties, wounds. Scott’s novels would be negligible without them. The wavering protagonist of his first novel may pass with breathtaking innocence from one side to another of the first (and so far greatest) crisis of the Union for which Defoe and others had laboured. But the sensitive reader is not as unscathed as Edward Waverley, nor of course are the glamorous doomed Highlanders by whom he is enchanted, Fergus and Flora Mac-Ivor.

Isabel Archer is scarred by the pain of betrayals and loyalties, her own and others, as Waverley is not, but she shares them with her readers. The reader of James’s last major completed novel, *The Golden Bowl* (1904), is likely to be much less confident about who has been loyal and treacherous to whom. An adulterous couple has been separated; husbands and wives have returned to each other; somebody, or everybody, has been betrayed. In this respect the novel looks forward as *The Portrait* looks back. It is notable, in the later essays of the current volume, how prominent are questions of loyalty, betrayal, and treachery, from Conrad through Greene, Waugh and Bowen to Golding. Forster too, who declared that if he had to choose between betraying his country and betraying his friend, he hoped he should have the guts to betray his country.⁷ But such bravura statements do not do justice, as novels can, to the traumatic reality of these choices. The wonderful ending of Forster’s own *A Passage to India* (1924) ponders the depth of the forces that pull the closest of friends and loved ones apart.

Greene too was capable of making such public statements. In 1969 he gave a speech in Hamburg, entitled ‘The Virtue of Disloyalty’, in which he castigated Shakespeare as a servant of the Establishment, and lauded by contrast the brave outspoken victims of political oppression in contemporary Russia and elsewhere. By ‘loyalty’ here Greene meant collaboration or complicity with the power of the State; ‘disloyalty’ meant dissident identification with those on its receiving end. It is a naïve position that fails to discriminate between different states and the uses to which their power is put, and assumes it all to be equally brutal. But Greene was speaking as a writer. He was giving a shocking new twist to an old understanding, that for the

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novelist the licence to stray across everyday borders and limits is essential. 'If we enlarge the bounds of sympathy in our readers we succeed in making the work of the State a degree more difficult. That is a genuine duty we owe society, to be a piece of grit in the State machinery', he asserted.⁸ Given that the University of Hamburg was trying to award Greene its Shakespeare Prize, the organisers may well have thought a piece of grit in the machinery was an apt description of their honorand.

Enlarging the bounds of sympathy is an ambition with which many novelists have found it easy to concur from the eighteenth century onwards, when modern notions of this mysterious passion get formed. George Eliot said something similar when she proposed that '[T]he greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies.'⁹ We look to novelists to help us imagine what life looks and sounds and feels like to other people. Yet enlarge the bounds as we may, the empire must still have its limits. What is this 'sympathy' to which so many novelists and readers appeal? Or what, to use another familiar formulation, does it mean for readers to 'identify' with a character? Reading through these essays, one is struck by the ebb and flow of confidence they express, prompted by their particular authors, not only about the ability we have to know other people, to enter their worlds, to imagine their experience, but further, about its desirability. Is there not something in its turn tyrannical, colonising, at the least presumptive in supposing 'we' can enter 'them'? With whose permission? Who is this 'we'? Greene avers that the disloyalty of which he's in favour 'encourages you to roam through any human mind'. How would we like strangers or even loved ones roaming at large through our minds, rummaging in our drawers, ransacking our closets? (Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* (1938) begins with an elder half-sister-in-law reading her teenage ward's diary, and discovering what the girl thinks of her.) Novels are animated by a conflict between the desire to know other people's secrets and the anxiety that this is illicit, intrusive, an act of aggression, and dangerous for all concerned. One of the striking developments in the group of twentieth-century novelists featured here is a sense, more robust than amongst their Victorian forebears, that other people constitute a mystery to be respected and even honoured.

The authors represented in this volume held as many different political views as one would expect, even if these did not neatly correspond to official party lines in their own time, let alone ours. Most of them would have rebutted, some with indignation, the charge that they were in any sense spies, rather than virtuous witnesses, whether for the defence, the prosecution, or both. What's the opposite of a spy? A Holy Fool perhaps, like some of Dickens's or Golding's Matty in *Darkness Visible* (1979). Or a visionary like

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Eliot's Mordecai in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) – a prophet, a mystic, a psychic, who can see straight through to the heart of the matter, or even the heart of darkness like Conrad's Kurtz, or remotely intuit it like Forster's Mrs Moore. Such figures are tempting to a novelist, yet they rarely occupy a central position. Dickens gives voice to the need we all feel, perplexed down here in the labyrinth, for the aerial viewpoint from which the secrets would all be visible: 'Oh for a good spirit who would take the house-tops off ... and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes, to swell the retinue of the Destroying Angel as he moved forth among them.'¹⁰ A Good Angel to match the Destroyer.

Spy, secret agent, correspondent, reporter, witness, angel: these are more and less dignified models for the act of relation, for finding things out and passing them on. Yet always there are the questions: on whose authority, at whose behest, and to whom? Defoe was being paid by Harley and reported back to him. Novelists are less constrained, more mysteriously spurred, and if they are lucky their words are dispersed to the four corners of the earth.

God's side would be a good one to be on. Throughout these essays there is a persistent reference to religious beliefs, values, and perspectives. These indicate the yearning for certitudes that the world, inside and outside the novels themselves, can no longer provide. If the idea of a literal or figurative journey is somehow essential to novels (even or especially when such movement is thwarted), then it is important to recognise the huge shadow cast over the English novel by John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678–84), at least up until the second half of the nineteenth century.

One of the religious works that made an influential impression on the young Bunyan was Arthur Dent's best-selling guide from early in the seventeenth century, *The Plain Man's Path-way to Heaven*. No novelist would be tempted to adopt such a title, except in heaviest irony, nor many readers now to pull it off the shelf. (*The Plain Man's Pathway to Hell* is another matter.) Novelists and readers are certainly interested in pathways, but only if they lead through storms, tempests, wrecks, ruins, mazes, and labyrinths, the recurrent metaphors on which novels depend for their sense of space, along with the attendant states of perplexity, bewilderment, and ecstasy that they induce.

Among these spaces, however, is one to which many of the following essays pay particular attention: that of the human body itself and the experience of 'embodiment' that it entails – the primal needs for shelter from the elements and predators, for physical and spiritual nourishment, for intimate passion. It would seem too blunt to call these housing, food, and sex, and yet good novelists remain in touch with these base needs even as they explore the superstructures elaborated over them. They conduct experiments in

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what it might mean to be happy for these particular characters in these circumstances, within this realm of the possible and probable. As for example, for this individual the bliss of surrender to the elements, and for that escape into solitude. For the novelist, the risk of ruin is never far away (his or her own, as well as their characters'). The whereabouts of our daily bread are not normally as alluring as the prospect of unions, sexual and otherwise, but they press on us unforgivingly. To put it like this may simply be another way of acknowledging the permanent dispute on which the novel is founded, between 'romance' – the good future, the better world – and 'realism': or, to use William Hazlitt's unforgettable phrase, 'the mortifying standard of reality'.¹¹

Let us come back to the issues about identity raised by the opening quotation by Defoe and turn them on the English novel itself. Defoe was writing at a moment in history when many questions of identity were focused in the union of the Kingdoms of England and Scotland. They continued after the official Act of Union in 1707, as they did after the other Act of Union with the third sister, the Kingdom of Ireland in 1801, and as they do of course to this day. Nor are these questions limited to the matter of how we name ourselves and each other and the countries where we were born, now reside, hope to die. Novels are particularly hospitable vehicles for exploring *all* kinds of question about identity. Who are you, who am I, who are we? Where and to what do we belong in a world so rapidly changing that we run the risk of not recognising it and therefore each other, ourselves? Who are all these Other People?

What is a novel? What is an *English* novel? Much critical capital or mere heavy weather can be made out of the questions raised by these terms 'English' and 'Novel'. There are occasions, even whole books, that can be profitably devoted to them. This introduction does not propose to do so at length. To take 'the novel' first. It is clear that in England and the anglo-phone world, novels established themselves as a durable way of making money from telling stories when Defoe late in life turned his brilliant hand to *Robinson Crusoe* and its successors. There had always been other ways of telling stories in writing, both in verse and prose – epic, romance, allegory, fable – and these older genres could be raided, adapted, and parodied in all sorts of ways by the shameless new upstart. There were pickings to be had from the ruins of classical antiquity, from Greek and Latin epic poetry and Alexandrian romance, and from other European vernaculars, from Boccaccio, Cervantes, Rabelais. Before Defoe there were some classics in English prose from the late Middle Ages, Malory's (and Caxton's) Arthurian romances, More's *Utopia* and Sidney's *Arcadia*. More promising perhaps, or less intimidating, were the examples of Elizabethan prose fiction in the

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lively rambunctious works of Thomas Nashe (*The Unfortunate Traveller*, 1594), Thomas Deloney (*Jack of Newbury*, 1597), and others. Nearer Defoe's own time, there were Bunyan's puritan allegories, most notably *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the more worldly commercial and erotic adventures of Aphra Behn, *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684–7) and *Oroonoko* (1688). Whether it is helpful to think of *Pilgrim's Progress* itself as 'a novel' is dubious; so too with Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759). Yet the boundaries that separate the novel from other prose fictions are ill-defined, porous, and permeable – constructs as artificial as those designed to keep people in their place, one side or the other of checkpoint or wall.

There are several points to be made about the intrinsic instabilities on which novels are founded and which they are designed to explore. The first is that writers have themselves often expressed anxiety about the appropriate terms for what they are up to. Frances Burney wrote of *Camilla*: 'I own I do not like calling it a *Novel* ...'.¹² Others have relished the multiplication of terms: Stevenson preferred words like tale, romance, epic, panorama. Then there's the matter of length or extent: how short can a novel be before it needs to be called something else – a novella, short story, or tale? This is an issue that only really arises around the end of the nineteenth century, with the downfall of the three-volume novel as the publishing norm and new opportunities for shorter fictional forms, eagerly seized by Stevenson, Kipling, James, Conrad, Joyce, Mansfield, and others. Thirdly: there is a vague and uneasy consensus that for a novel, 'realism' of some kind or degree may be a prerequisite. But this does not amount to much. If the novel exploits and corrupts in the interests of realism some of the allegedly purer genres of romance, allegory, fable, or satire, rooting and grounding them in time, place and circumstance, then they in turn continue to infect the novel with their own ambitions and designs, pulling it towards higher truths or other worlds.

This is not a *Companion to the English Novel*; if it were, its organising principles would probably have been quite different. A *Companion to English Novelists* promises something less concerted and more dishevelled or at least dispersed in its attention to the twenty-seven particular writers selected. It could be accused of a permissive attitude to what it means, in this context, to be 'English'. This has come to mean more than the language in which the novels are written. Nevertheless the consideration persists that there is no such thing as the British language any more than there is the American or Australian language, though of course there is comedy to be made from the mutual incomprehensibility of people who allegedly 'speak the same language'. There may be something it would be useful to think of

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as the British novel, as there are certainly university courses on British literature, but this should entail asking questions no less hard than those posed by historians about what it means and has meant to be 'British'. The tests that a work of literature should undergo to determine its affiliations are more complex than those employed by immigration officers checking our passports. It is salutary and a shade depressing to recall how few of the novelists included in this volume would have needed a passport or known what one was. The term 'British' is no less vexed than 'English' and probably more so. It has been known to cause offence to suggest that James Joyce might feel at home in a volume devoted to English novelists. But not as much as it would if the title were 'British novelists'.

For an 'English novel', the language itself would have seemed a sufficient condition until the emergence in the nineteenth century of 'the American novel', followed of course by the Irish novel, the Scottish, the Canadian, Australian, and so on. As the relevant essay in the current volume justly contends, there was in the early years of the nineteenth century no tradition or idea of the Scottish novel to which Walter Scott could think of himself as contributing.¹³ By the 1880s, when Robert Louis Stevenson was making a name for himself, this was much less true, and when Lewis Grassie Gibbon (pen-name of James Leslie Mitchell) was producing the three novels subsequently collected as *A Scots Quair* (1946), he was part of a fully fledged project. The first of the trilogy, *Sunset Song* (1932), 'was hailed as the first really Scottish novel since Galt', so the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* tells us.¹⁴ (John Galt (1779–1839) was Scott's contemporary, author of *Annals of the Parish* (1821) and others.) In the later nineteenth century questions about a writer's national identity or affiliation were not unknown. Henry James suffered a good deal of abuse from American friends and enemies alike for his settlement in England; writing loftily about poor Nathaniel Hawthorne and the vacancy of the American cultural scene didn't help. But James had it easy by comparison with his most obvious American successor, T. S. Eliot.

These questions of where writers really belong, to whom and what they owe allegiance, have come to seem increasingly important, at least to those involved in projects of cultural nationalism. Major writers represent precious capital; for the tourist trade too, as Ellmann's essay on Joyce here reminds us. Clearly a selection of English novelists that includes writers born in Edinburgh, Dublin, New York, and Berdyczów (in Russian Ukraine) – to take only the most blatant instances of Scott and Stevenson, Joyce, James, and Conrad – is making some claim of its own. This is not the foolish one that James is 'really' an English novelist, nor even that he is more English than American. Scott and Stevenson certainly belong in any *Companion to Scottish Literature*, as James does in the American, and Joyce in the Irish

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equivalents.¹⁵ (Conrad is another matter, because of the language.) But there are other kinds of membership, in the European novel for instance, and beyond that, with increasing vacuity – though the Nobel Prize judges, like the UN, do their best – World Literature. Many of the writers included here drew inspiration from novels (and other writings) in other languages, from Cervantes of course, from Goethe, from Rabelais, Balzac, Flaubert, and Proust, from Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. Writers as different from each other as James, Conrad, Lawrence, and Woolf all looked abroad at least as vigorously as they viewed their colleagues and rivals at home. Many of them in turn have been widely read beyond the anglophone world.

The claim made by the current selection therefore is for a permissive and inclusive idea of the English novel, one that readily acknowledges the contribution made by its chosen authors to other ideas, traditions, communities, and readerships. According to this idea the borders of what constitutes the English novel should be no more heavily policed than those surrounding the genre of the novel itself. To ask whether a novelist belongs here or there, to this country, nation, culture, club, or tribe, is to misprise and demean the whole nature of the writer's project, the good or great ones at least. Which is to contest those certitudes about identity both personal and collective on which authorities of all kinds seek to take their stand.

This *Companion* then celebrates the plurality and diversity of the English novel. Yet however enlarged the bounds of sympathy, limits have had to be drawn and choices made. These twenty-seven writers are those whose work currently seems of most enduring value; they are those whom most readers now are likely to wish to reread and whom they should therefore read first. All enthusiasts of the eighteenth-century novel will want to read Sarah Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744) and Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771), as will admirers of the Victorian novel Sheridan Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* (1864) and Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* (1883). But it would require a special or specialist loyalty to recommend reading any of these before *Tom Jones* and *Middlemarch*. A further way of justifying this selection is to claim that these are the figures who have seemed most important to their novelist peers, the richest and most fertile models against whom contemporary and subsequent writers have sought to measure themselves, from whom to draw strength: the most valuable to emulate. Let us avoid the depressing word 'canon'.

The number of authors included here is certainly a good deal larger than the handful admitted by F. R. Leavis to *The Great Tradition* (1948), a predictably recurrent point of reference for several contributors. The novelists featured here include several on whom Leavis specifically cast his anathema,