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The First Steps

IN 1946 PHILIP LARKIN, THE POET, PUBLISHED A NOVEL called *Jill*. In the novel a young man from the Lancashire working class, John Kemp, comes down to Oxford on the train. He is so apprehensive about the etiquette of eating in railway carriages that he rushes into the lavatory and bolts the door in order to eat the sandwiches his mother has carefully prepared for him. At Oxford, John is self-conscious, ill at ease, far too deferential toward his roommate (Christopher Warner, a suave, elegant, and callous young man from London). John often feels like the stableboy invited, as a consciously democratic gesture, to tea at the manor house. The sons of the working class may come to Oxford (as Whitbread does in the novel) to study hard, isolate themselves in their rooms with books and bad coffee, prepare themselves assiduously for careers in Workers' Education. But John wants more: the wit, the glamour, and the ease of Oxford life. In the novel, set in 1940, John finds the distance between his Lancashire background and the Oxford he wants impossible to bridge. Because he is rejected by Christopher Warner's set (they regard him as gauche and "stuffed") and, in turn, rejects Whitbread's Oxford of careful accumulation,

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John can only retreat into an impossible fantasy that both intensifies his loneliness and dissipates the force of the novel.

Since the end of World War II, the issues have been much less clear. Although John Kemp is still self-conscious and class distinctions still exist, he is no longer quite so deferential toward his well-bred superiors, and the distance between Lancashire and Oxford is not quite so vast or so easily demonstrable. John Kemp is no longer a curiosity. He is both more complex and more central to British society. And, in the past ten years or so, as evident in the work of Kingsley Amis, John Wain, John Osborne, Iris Murdoch, and numerous others, he has become a principal character in British fiction and drama.

This kind of hero, the intelligent and irreverent young man from the lower or lower middle classes, educated by scholarship but let loose in a society still permeated by class distinction and respect for breeding, has been fixed by many journals and reviews as a contemporary phenomenon. Arguments, based on superficial labels like “angry young men,” concerned with whether or not Jim Dixon’s preference for beer will ultimately ruin Britain, neglect the issues of the novel in which Jim Dixon appears, but these arguments, by their very existence, do show that the novels bear some relevance to contemporary society. The heroes in novels by Amis, Wain, Keith Waterhouse, and others both reflect the postwar British society and demonstrate a good deal of similarity with one another. These heroes are all better educated than their fathers were, although they frequently retain an emotional allegiance to their fathers’ habits and attitudes; they are all concerned with getting jobs and women in a competitive society; they care about how one behaves in pubs and at cocktail parties; they all berate the aristocracy’s emotional vacuity, although they often, in varying degrees, envy the aristocracy’s smooth composure; they all worry about how they can operate in a world in which they exert only very limited control. In other words, these are all novels of conduct and of class placed in contemporary, usually urban, society.

The novel of conduct and class is certainly not new in the

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English tradition. Richardson and Fielding dealt extensively with class distinctions and struggles in eighteenth-century society and, a century later, Dickens, Trollope, and then Hardy frequently used the theme of the young man from the lower or lower middle classes attempting to enter a more urbane and cosmopolitan society. Class lines, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were not prescribed with absolute, immutable rigidity, although the problems and the stresses holding back the young man of energy were invariably greater than the opportunities before him. In the twentieth century, however, and particularly since the end of World War II, the young man finds moving from one class to another superficially easier. He may earn a grant to study at the university, and the marks of accent and appearance are less completely distinctive in contemporary Britain. Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* was, no matter what his ambition, indelibly categorized as a stonemason with a rustic background. Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar*, in contrast, is both less marked and less explained as a young man who, the son of a haulage contractor in a grimy Yorkshire town, half-heartedly works in a funeral office. But if, for Hardy's hero, the background from which he wished to escape was firmer and stronger, so also was his aspiration strong and definite. Christminster, no matter how impossible for Jude, was a fixed and unvarying aspiration, representing the truth, beauty, and dignity of scholarship. *Billy Liar*'s aspirations are far more vague; he is, in ways, wiser than Jude, but he has less sense of where he wants to go. In the nineteenth-century novel of class, the alternatives were more apt to be fixed. Not that the hero had an easy time choosing between the alternatives, for easy choice would signify simplification in any century, but both the background and the aspiration or aim were apt to be thought of as more firm and definite entities, no matter how irreconcilable with each other. The contemporary novel of class, however, depicts a society of somewhat greater mobility in which the hero is apt to be a good deal less sure of from what or to what he is moving. The basic problem of the novel of class and conduct, the issue

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of how the hero can come or not come to terms with himself and his flexible world, is the same as it was during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But the terms themselves are vastly different, and, in a society in which change seems to accelerate geometrically, the tone also seems significantly different from that apparent in earlier fiction.

Early in the twentieth century writers realized that values and alternatives in society were becoming far less fixed and secure. In part because of rapidly changing values of conduct and class, novels frequently tended to center on personal and metaphysical issues, to use social issues only as temporary decoration for the structure of permanent metaphysical and personal concerns. Arnold Bennett, for example, despite all his precise and acute social observation, was more interested in demonstrating a general theory about time than in dealing profoundly with conduct and class. And when novels of this period did deal with class, novels such as E. M. Forster's *Howards End* or Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, they tended to view class issues from the perspective of the vanishing intellectual aristocracy. Certainly the portraits of Leonard Bast and Charles Tansley are given from a regretful and condescending point of view. Yet neither novel can be judged by its portrait of the aspiring young man from the lower classes, for Forster's novel depends on personal relationships among the equally cultivated and Mrs. Woolf's is both a personal and a metaphysical vision. The novel of conduct and class (except, to some extent, in the work of D. H. Lawrence) gave way to other, less traditional means of dealing with the quickly altering values of the twentieth century. Since the end of World War II, however, many young writers have been attempting to return to a traditional nineteenth-century theme, the theme of how a man works his way through society, with a characteristic twentieth-century lack of assurance about what the man or the society is really like.

In outlining a society full of class changes, judgments, and distinctions, these contemporary writers often exhibit and express sympathy for the lower classes, for those not granted the auto-

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matic privilege of an inherited position within the Establishment. The search for a lower-class perspective is often deliberate; Doris Lessing, at the beginning of her documentary called *In Pursuit of the English*, states that when she arrived in England, having been brought up in Southern Rhodesia, she spent her time “in pursuit of the working-class” as material for her fiction. She did not find the rugged, sensitive, innately honest and perceptive proletariat she sought. John Kemp or Amis’ Jim Dixon is also not the genuine representative of the working classes, for this is the son of the lower or lower middle class who is granted a university education. The education itself tangles the lines of class identification, and the novels of Amis, Wain, and Larkin do not, for all their concern with house painters and Welsh miners’ sons, delineate any clear working-class attitude as such. John Kemp and Jim Dixon may suffer in the genteel university, may feel keenly their cultural dislocation, but their problems and their aims are put in terms quite different from those of Alan Sillitoe’s capstan lathe operator in a Nottingham bicycle factory. Alan Sillitoe best demonstrates working-class attitudes, for John Braine’s workers (in both *Room at the Top* and *The Vodi*) are so caught in endless repetitions of maudlin self-pity, so blurred by a lack of distance between author and hero, that they are left little room to express or observe any issues outside themselves. Sillitoe, in a recent collection of essays published as *The Writer’s Dilemma* (ed. Stephen Spender, 1961), a collection culled from a TLS symposium originally called “Limits of Control,” has directly stated the need for a working-class perspective in fiction:

These working-class people who are not afraid to take a hard-cover book in their hands suffer from certain disadvantages compared to the middle-class reader. The latter, no matter what values he lives by, can take out a book and see in it either a mirror of himself, or someone he knows: he is fully represented in contemporary writing, while the man who works at the lathe is not. Working men and women who read do not have the privilege of seeing themselves honestly and realistically portrayed in novels. They are

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familiar with wish-fulfilment images flashed at them in cliché form on television or in the press, and the novels they read in which they do figure are written by those novelists of the Right who are quite prepared to pass on the old values and who, unable to have any feeling for the individual, delineate only stock characters. [P. 74.]

Sillitoe is, in this respect, not typical of most contemporary British writers. While others, such as Wain and Amis, would probably agree in castigating the “novelists of the Right” and certainly demonstrate sympathy with the working classes, they do not plead for a particular class perspective. Rather, they recognize the influence of a class structure without acknowledging its worth. However strongly political and social leaders may urge one to feel pride in whatever badges of social and economic imposition he automatically wears (and, after all, the leaders have little to lose because they wear the brightest badges), the representative hero, in much contemporary British fiction, resents the public badge, the articulation of the system. He feels no class unity, no public identification, and therefore works hard for the direct and the tangible: the job that pays more or the more attractive and exciting woman.

Most of these writers do not simply present social attitudes as thinly disguised sociological reports. Usually, the social attitudes are filtered through individual emotions and reactions, although some writers, like Doris Lessing, fill their novels with long sections of sociological journalism. Similarly, these writers, though seldom committed to a particular political cause or doctrine, often show the influence of politics upon their characters. In *Under the Net* Iris Murdoch uses Lefty, a political agitator, as one of the nets, the series of traps that capture unwary human beings; Angus Wilson describes the impact of political engagement on scholars, writers, and television commentators in both *Hemlock and After* and *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*; William Golding traces his hero's temporary adherence to communism in *Free Fall*. In their vital and consistent concern with social and political problems, all these writers furnish

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statements, both implicit and explicit, that the world is wider than the vicar's coming for tea or the hang-over of psychic guilt that characterized too many inferior British novels of past decades. Indeed, the vitality and the enlarged area of concern have been responsible for a good deal of the praise and the attention these contemporary novelists have received in the past decade.

For ten or fifteen years before these writers began to publish in the middle 'fifties, British writing seemed anemic and concerned with well-executed trivia. James Joyce and Virginia Woolf had been pioneers in creating a new kind of novel, developing complex and intricate devices to portray fully the patterns and the nuances of their worlds. In more recent years many of their followers, like Elizabeth Bowen, were refining, distilling, trying to get the gossip around the tea table more exactly and significantly shaded, or, like William Sansom, attenuating the complexities of the love affair almost to the point of irrelevance. And the genre lost energy. Similarly, the satirical novel was no longer the powerful weapon that Huxley and Waugh used to castigate their contemporaries, to depict the follies of a world grown increasingly callous and meaningless. Far more gently, people like Angela Thirkell delicately satirized a little world they wished to preserve, the world of teacups and the village parson. Satire became, in some instances, a defense to protect the narrow, shallow society, like that of Nancy Mitford, in which class and breeding really matter, after all. The social novel, without even an Arnold Bennett, became either a curious transfer of pre-World War I issues into contemporary terms (as in the work of L. P. Hartley) or the sober document outlining the problems our civilization faces (as in the work of C. P. Snow). Valid as these aims and attitudes were, they did not provide outstanding fiction.

The situation on the stage was even more moribund. The British theater was confined to magnificent revivals of great classics, insipid little comedies centering on Nanny's advice, and the sort of soap opera Terence Rattigan wrote for his Aunt

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Edna who attended matinees in the second row of the dress circle. The popular novel was, at its best, a kind of well-constructed and well-decorated thriller, like the scientific and psychological thrillers of Nigel Balchin or the religious thrillers of Graham Greene. At the other end of the scale, the careful products of sensitive writers like the Sitwells, Henry Green, and Ivy Compton-Burnett seemed remote from the concerns of post-World War II Britain, a distance represented by the fact that *Horizon* folded in 1949.

The contemporary British writers are not concerned simply with depicting a wide segment of current British society. A number of them also occupy themselves with moral issues that are not specifically social or political, for John Wain, John Bowen, and Angus Wilson are all, in vastly different ways, firmly committed to moral points of view. Yet these writers do not compose a new branch of Moral Rearmament. They share no group moral position, as they share no specific political doctrine. And, in addition, they hold their various moralities with vastly different degrees of intensity. Doris Lessing's attack on the shallowness of the British colonial set in Africa is far more morally committed than, and has a very different pitch from, Kingsley Amis' attack on gentility at the provincial university.

Amis' pitch, however, is more generally characteristic of contemporary writers than is Doris Lessing's, for many of these novelists use a good deal of comedy. Amis, Wain, Iris Murdoch, William Golding, John Bowen, and Angus Wilson are frequently very funny, developing a concept of comedy that ranges from simple verbal jokes, farce, and comic images to complete projections of entirely bizarre and incongruous worlds. Each one views his material in an essentially comic perspective, aware of man's various and discordant experience, cognizant that a single view of man leads to pretentious oversimplification. This comic perspective, this multiple awareness, represents a world in which man faces many facts, many experiences, without any clear guide or formula around which to organize his experience.

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Clearly the old guides and formulas have vanished. Two world wars, the threat of the hydrogen bomb, and disillusion with the Marxist version of world brotherhood have left these writers skeptical about the value of banners and causes. At the same time, they have seen enough during the days of the dole, the abdication, and the new Elizabethan coronation to doubt the ultimate value of Britain's clerical "pomp and circumstance." The target of many of their novels, the material for the comedy, is the public cause or the reverential generalization about an institution: Marxism, Welsh nationalism, the sanctity of the British Museum, the lay religious community that resembles the Boy Scouts.

This comic perspective would seem to lead to a relativism of both definition and value, and relativism is nothing new; the failure of old systems and definitions is no longer astounding. Relativism has become so deeply ingrained in twentieth-century culture that it permeates even the popular novel sold at the railway bookstall or the airline terminal. In one such novel, a conventionally heroic and banal love story called *I Can Take It All*, by Anthony Glyn, a novel distinguished only by some excellent descriptive accounts of contemporary Finland and the logging industry, the hero expresses this relativism of definition as one of his few profound perceptions:

Everything is funny and serious both at once. If you get one without the other, then there's something wrong and you ought to start asking why. You oughtn't to go round saying, "Is this the funny bit or is this the serious bit?" It's like those masks you sometimes see outside theaters, you know, one grinning inanely and the other scowling and pulling his mouth down. Comedy and tragedy. There was a time when everything had to be one or the other. Either you ended up happily married to the king's daughter if it was a comedy or you died in the last scene. Nowadays it hasn't got to be either or. It's neither or both. And it's not so extreme either. You can marry the king's daughter if you like, but you probably won't be very happy and it won't last for long. And

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you won't really be killed, you'll recover with penicillin. And both will be rather funny and rather serious at the same time. It's got to be both, that's the modern world.

[Signet edition, 1961, pp. 98–99.]

Glyn's hero may oversimplify the past, for tragicomedy is an old form, but his attitude toward the present is typical. The heroine, a mystic and a healthy Finn, feels that the hero is being cynical. He replies, "No, not cynical. If anything, humane." Glyn carries the point no further, but many of the more distinguished contemporary writers feel that some kind of commitment, some kind of choice, is possible even in the midst of a world of relative definitions and relative values. These writers, never having known that world of secure myth before 1914, have always lived without faith in any overriding public truth. They have always accepted uncertainty because they have never known anything else. Raw and sudden disillusion may shock a writer into complete relativism; never having had illusions, through two generations of uncertainty, may lead the writer to search for what he can, with modification and qualification, assert. Most contemporary writers go beyond the development of a comic multiplicity, assert a limited commitment, a kind of value, very carefully, sometimes hesitantly. The specific commitment varies a good deal. John Wain, in *The Contenders*, attacks the competitive instinct apparent in both the artistic and the business worlds, and advocates, in the character of his lumbering, awkward, yet understanding hero, a kind of pre-Industrial Revolution simplicity, William Golding's unique and striking metaphors both assert and qualify a commitment to orthodox Christianity. Iris Murdoch, through a vast structure of natural, philosophical, and contemporary images, insists on the value of the unstructured, spontaneous, creature side of man. Commitment may involve both engagement in contemporary life and assertion, in a limited sense, of a particular point of view toward that life.

Most of these writers, in an attempt to depict their engage-