Character and Liberalism—II

by Bernard Bergonzi

A similar concept of character to John Bayley's was presented by Iris Murdoch, in an influential essay called 'Against Dryness', published in *Encounter* in 1961. Her approach is more overtly philosophical: she argues that in the face of the failure of traditional liberal philosophy to develop an adequate concept of man, the novel can give us a full sense of the uniqueness and mysteriousness of human personality. She finds these qualities exemplified in the great novelists of the nineteenth century, particularly the Russians, and contrasts their kind of novel with the typical fictional modes of the twentieth century: the 'journalistic' novel of accumulated fact and information, a degenerate descendant of literary naturalism, which is often a formless, inflated daydream; and the 'crystalline' novel of dry aesthetic concentration, which is more concerned with an ideal of form than with conveying the variousness of reality. A normative note emerges at the end of Miss Murdoch's essay:

> Real people are destructive of myth, contingency is destructive of fantasy and opens the way for the imagination. Think of the Russians, those great masters of the contingent. Too much contingency of course may turn art into journalism. But since reality is incomplete, art must not be too much afraid of incompleteness. Literature must always present a battle between real people and images; and what it requires now is a much stronger and more complex conception of the former.

There is a clear consonance between Iris Murdoch's ideas and John Bayley's, and, again, the contrast between these ideas and the characteristic utterance of the Continental or American avant-garde is striking.

There is a comparable discussion of character in the late W. J. Harvey's book, *Character and the Novel*, published in 1965. His ideas are similar to those of John Bayley and Irish Murdoch, although his book contains more argument and aims to be more theoretically systematic. It develops an ambitious attempt to understand the nature of fiction by describing the novelist's interpretation of reality in terms of four Kantian 'constitutive categories', through which he mediates and structures experience: Time, Identity, Causality and Freedom. Harvey's discussion is ingenious, exacting, and full of incidental illuminations, but not, I think, altogether convincing. Yet for my present purpose his significance lies in the way in which he approaches the novel primarily in terms of character; his book

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contains many vigorous defences of the necessity of character, and he quotes approvingly Iris Murdoch's remark: 'When we think of the works of Tolstoy or George Eliot, we are not remembering Tolstoy and George Eliot, we are remembering Dolly, Kitty, Stiva, Dorothea and Casaubon'. Harvey also brings out the ideological implications of the centrality of character. He directs our attention back to the origins of the novel, and its individualistic, free and unconditioned response to experience:

> We may fairly say that the novel is the distinct art form of liberalism, by which I mean not a political view or even a mode of social and economic organization but rather a state of mind. This state of mind has as its controlling centre an acknowledgment of the plenitude, diversity and individuality of human beings in society, together with the belief that such characteristics are good as ends in themselves. It delights in the multiplicity of existence and allows for a plurality of beliefs and values; as Presswarden [*sic*] notes in Durrell's *Clea*: 'At each moment of time all multiplicity waits at your elbow.' Tolerance, scepticism, respect for the autonomy of others are its watchwords; fanaticism and the monolithic creed its abhorrence.

Harvey asserts that the novel is the essential vehicle of a liberal, pluralistic world-view, and suggests that good novels are unlikely to be written by anyone totally committed to an absolute and monistic pattern of beliefs, such as Christianity or Marxism; such believers are more likely to write forms of fiction that are peripheral to the true novel, like romances, fables or novels of ideas. Although committed to pluralism and liberal values Harvey acknowledged, in a crucial passage, that such values may be on the wane:

> It may well be, of course, that we are moving towards a form of society where such a state of mind is no longer viable, that liberalism is a luxury rarely allowed by history. In this case the novel will, like other art forms in the past, cease to be an available imaginative mode and will be supplanted by other art forms, either entirely new or drastic mutations of the novel itself. Considered in this way, the radical experiments of many modern novelists may be seen as the first attempts at such a mutation, the first imaginative responses to a changing world view which involves the gradual death of liberalism.

This passage chimes significantly with the remarks by George Steiner quoted earlier in the first part of this article.

At this point, various strands in my argument should begin to converge. Certainly, to speak for myself, I agree with John Bayley (despite my criticism of aspects of his approach), Iris Murdoch, and W. J. Harvey, about the supremacy of character in the novel; a humanistic view of literature should enjoin both writer and reader to respect and even love the characters of a novel. This, at least, is true about the novel as I have always known and understood it;

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the contemporary English novels which I most admire are precisely those which offer the greatest plenitude of character. Yet I also feel that this attitude, which still comes naturally to English readers, is historically conditioned and that its end may be in sight for precisely the reasons Harvey indicated. The liberal and individualistic virtues so marvellously preserved and crystallized in the traditional novel are, indeed, on the retreat over a large part of the globe, and have been continuously on the defensive ever since 1914. There is a good deal of evidence—none of it, happily, quite conclusive—for a human future that will be anti-individual, collectivist and, in effect, totalitarian. One sees it predicted, variously, in McLuhan's ideas about the retribalization of man by means of the electronic media, in George Steiner's reflections on the supersession of individual awareness; and in Marcuse's analysis of the 'happy consciousness', where a vast complex of social controls maintains a state of affairs in which the given social reality is absolute, and there are no longer any intellectual or volitional possibilities of transcending that reality. And the active movements in the western world that are opposed to the monolithic forces of corporate society—whether capitalist or communist—are also quite vocally opposed to the liberal virtues. It was, for instance, a somewhat chilling moment when, in the spring of 1968, a group of student activist leaders from all over Europe who were assembled in a BBC television studio for a discussion of their aims, burst into derisive laughter at the mention of the word 'liberalism'. The recent wave of student power movements, with their instinctive belief in the rightness of violence, and their contempt for tolerance and free speech, indicates that among a powerful segment of those who are young, articulate, and highly educated, 'the gradual death of liberalism' as W. J. Harvey called it, is no longer very gradual.

This opposition to liberalism usually has a *marxisant* basis, where it is not overtly anarchistic: from a Marxist point of view the liberalism that describes itself as a pure respect for persons, untainted by ideology, is in fact very much an ideology, a mystification or form of words, which conceals the crude social realities of exploitation and economic oppression. There is an attempted answer to Harvey —and to a lesser extent to John Bayley and Iris Murdoch—in a long and remarkable essay by an able young Marxist critic, John Goode, called ' "Character" and Henry James' (*New Left Review*, Nov.-Dec., 1966). Goode relates the ideas of these three critics to what he describes as 'a developing ideology in English literary criticism . . . which we might call neo-liberalism'. Proceeding by an exhaustive and not always lucid analysis of the late novels of Henry James, Goode sees the 'neo-liberal' idea of character, the opaque, autonomous, self-determining organism, as actually a typical product of the competitive individualism of the capitalist ethos, where the relations between characters will consist, not in mutual respect and love, but

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in antagonism and acquisitiveness. He refers to Harvey's claim that liberalism eludes 'the categories of any ideology', and continues:

> The work of the later James might have enabled him to avoid this evident contradiction, for James is saturated in the values of capitalism, in its metaphysical notions of the substantial self as well as its ethical notions of human relationship. The great point about the late novels is that they implicitly celebrate these notions at the point of head-on collision. The intrinsic self can only exist in the conditions in which others are contextual; to protect herself against the threat to her own intrinsic self, defined by its possession of her father, Maggie has to turn her back on Charlotte, on the Prince and even on the father as real, intrinsic others. In order not to be owned she has to become an owner, and what she becomes is the owner of others in the same sense that the author owns his characters in a well-made little drama: 'they might have been figures rehearsing some play of which she herself was the author: they might even, for the happy appearance they continued to present, have been such figures as would, by the strong note of character in each, fill any author with the certitude of success, especially of their own histrionic.' The opposing self opposes self.

Much of what John Goode says about Henry James seems to me true in a pragmatic way, and not only about *The Golden Bowl.* I recently reread *The Portrait of a Lady* and was forcibly struck by the way in which the whole texture of the novel is pervaded by images of property, and particularly of works of art considered as portable property—metaphorically prefiguring *The Spoils of Poynton*—and by the extent to which the relations between the characters are so acquisitive and manipulative.

Nevertheless, Harvey's essential point still seems to me to stand. He does, as Goode points out, indulge in a certain sleight-of-hand when he insists on seeing liberalism as not 'a political view or even a mode of social and economic organization but rather a state of mind'; the connexions between all three are not so easily suppressed. At the same time, Mr Goode needs to remember that liberalism *is* a state of mind, whatever else it may be, and that it is perfectly possible to be either a liberal and tolerant Marxist, or an illiberal and intolerant one. The novel is still pre-eminently about free individuals, even if one wants to adjust the focus somewhat so as to stress the competitiveness that their freedom necessarily involves, rather than the spiritual cosiness that John Bayley dwells on. The point can easily be picked up, without ideological directives, by reading Stendhal and Balzac as well as Dickens and George Eliot. It is salutary to bear in mind that the novel did not come into existence in a social vacuum and, as I have stressed, has been implicated throughout its existence with social, ideological and even technological factors; I have no objection, even, to describing the liberalism that pervades the novel as an 'ideology', providing that one does not take this to mean that liberal values are thereby

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automatically dismissed as illusory. The value of Marxist criticism is in letting us see that many traditional novels have a richer moral texture than a relaxed interpretation may have suggested, with freedom and the autonomous personality paradoxically but inevitably involved with exploitation and competitiveness. But when it tries to be normative Marxist criticism loses rigour and even credibility. For instance, Lukács' earnest, hopeful and tortuous reflections on 'Critical Realism and Socialist Realism' are the products of a very remote cultural situation and seem to me to have no conceivable relation to any of the literature in which I am most interested.

If one agrees with the Marxists that the novel is a historically conditioned form, the vehicle of a liberal ideology which exalted the individual and the individual apprehension of experience, and which in practice drew most of its strength from the dual tension between individuals and each other, and between individuals and society; then one is entitled to ask them if they expect the novel to go on existing when our present phase of history is over; when the utopian future is established, and, as the ringing phrase has it, the exploitation of man by man is no more. One assumes that the answer is 'no'. One kind of contemporary Marxist analysis would, in effect, abolish the creative tension between individual and society by collapsing both concepts:

> 'Society' and the 'individual' are both essentialist abstractions, based on the notion that persons and institutions are closed, demarcated *beings*, with fixed boundaries between them. In reality, there are no such separate, autarchic beings—there is instead a continuum of human *actions*, which collide, converge and coalesce to form the whole personal and social world we live in.

This statement, by Mr Perry Anderson, is of a curiously significant kind; one notes, initially, its totalitarian implications; it could readily fit into a fascist world-view as well as a Marxist one. One also needs to ask what the depersonalized 'human actions' are which Mr Anderson refers to, if not further examples of 'essentialist abstraction'. Presumably some such formulation as this underlies John Goode's attack on the conception of fictional character upheld by English 'neo-liberal' critics; yet, translated into literary terms, it is hard to see what its positive implications would be. One cannot imagine it being reconcilable with Lukács' desire to see the realistic tradition of the novel continue sturdily in being, albeit as socialist realism, and with his incessant preoccupation with the relation of the individual and the type. Yet there is a sense in which Anderson's desire to abolish the idea of the substantive individual does have literary suggestions, of a familiar kind. It recalls the familiar concept of the dehumanization of modern art, deplored by traditionalists like Ortega y Gasset, and by Marxists, of an older and more humane stamp, like Lukács and Ernst Fischer. A world in which there are no

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solidly established persons, but only 'actions, which collide, converge and coalesce', is surely that of the twentieth-century *avant-garde* novel, whether represented by the subjectivity of Virginia Woolf or *La Nausée*, or the willed objectivity of Robbe-Grillet. One returns with fresh insight to W. J. Harvey's phrase about seeing 'the radical experiments of many modern novelists' as 'the first imaginative responses to a changing world view which involves the gradual death of liberalism'. Despite the assertiveness of tone, contemporary Marxism is full of uncertainties and contradictions on aesthetic questions, as on most others, and is riven by scholastic factionalism. Nevertheless, if liberalism is in its last days, and the future belongs to one of the several possible varieties of totalitarianism, there is at least a chance that a Marxist future might preserve more humane values than some other varieties, even though novels with characters in them will have perished along with the bourgeois ideology which gave rise to them, and, in George Steiner's uninviting words, 'the voice of man would again be choral'.

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