The Ethical Tendency of the English novel

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THE ETHICAL TENDENCY OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL

A THESIS

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Preface:

The following thesis was written for the degree of Master of Arts and was presented to the Faculty of Iowa State University May, eighteen ninety seven.

The selection of the subject of The Ethical Tendency in The English Novel arose from a desire to learn if the English Novel in its development had recognized the principle of Art and Ethics as English Poetry has done and if both branches of literature had come to the same conclusion. I have given a great deal of care to the accumulation of material from the study of the English Novel in form of notes and criticism. The effect of minute criticism has merely been to strengthen my conviction that the theory I have laid down is substantially true. I think I may at least claim from the critic who is inclined to reject my views a careful consideration of the arguments and evidence upon which they are founded.
It would be impossible for me to speak too warmly of the kindness which Dr. Sanctope has shown me in connection with my work, and I am especially indebted to him for criticism, both general and minute, that has been of the greatest service.

A. T. Harney.

Down City,

May seventeen.
The novelist ought to be the happiest of all authors, for he enjoys the most perfect freedom known to literature. Any way of genuine, any special faculty whatever which he may happen to possess, is at full liberty to develop itself in the direction which best suits it. The novelist almost alone among the fathers of letters may "walk his own wild way whatever that leads him." No one thinks of ordaining for him that he must tread in one particular path and no other; that he must beat around and around forever in one prescribed circle. For him, there is no dignity of history; there are no dramatic invincibles; no law of rhythm, no dactylic and spondaic, no Spenserian or English heroic. There are no codes of critical laws to ordain that a romanticist must follow a certain pattern, must not deal with a certain topic, must only introduce this character, or that situation.
on given conditions. In poetry and the drama, and I might perhaps even add in history, hardly any man has ever become great except by braving in the first instance the literary dangers and penalties of rebellion. This the novelist escaped. No one insisted that "Tom Jones" ought to have talked in the style of the "Grand Cyrus", and the existence of "Tom Jones" did not necessitate sentence of death upon "Waverley"; nor did "Waverley" interfere with "Oliver Twist"; nor did "Oliver Twist" darken the rising prospect of "Pendennis". If a man or woman attempt to be a novelist and fail, the blame cannot be laid to the account of pedantic critical legislation. Perhaps this happy freedom is greatly owing to the fact that criticism deliberately ignored the novelist, and regarded him as a creature outside the pale of art, no more responsible to rule and law of critical counts than Richardson is expected to conform to the dramatic
unities. It is only since the popularity and influence of prose fiction that critics have given serious attention; however, it was then too late to lay down rules, or form schools for prose fiction. He may write for a purpose, or for no purpose, he may be a politician, a satirist, or a mere teller of stories; he may be a realist or an idealist; he is sure to be criticized and judged on the ground which he has spontaneously assumed. He will be estimated for what he has done and for his manner of doing it and he is not likely to receive criticism because he has not done something which he never professed nor desired to accomplish.

One result of all this is that the novelist is now our most influential writer. If he be a man of genius, his power over the community he addresses is far beyond that of any other author. Macaulay's influence over the average English mind was narrow compared with that of Dickens; even
 Carlyle's influence on the whole was not so great as that of Shakspeare. The readers of 'The Idylls of the King' were but a limited number when compared with the readers of 'Jane Eyre'; nor can Mrs. Browning's finest poem pretend to attract as many readers and admirers, even among people of taste and education, as were suddenly won by 'Adam Bede'. Yet our English novelists are not by any means the most cosmopolitan in the public they address. As English authors are read in France as George Sand, and Victor Hugo, and Dumas, and Stendhal have been read in England. All this shows how decisively the current of public feeling at present sets in favour of prose fiction.

The influence of the novelist is now publicly acknowledged, for a long time his power over society, except as a mere teller of stories was ignored; nevertheless, this man felt an influence almost all pervading, almost—
irresistible, yet silent, secret and not to be openly acknowledged. Only within the latter half of the present century have cabinet ministers ventured to quote from popular stories, and princes pay tribute to the genius of departed novelists.

Can this influence be turned to any direct and deliberate account? Is it given to the novelist to accomplish any definite social object, to solve, or even help towards, the solution of any vexed social question? Is his mission, to use the conventional phrase, merely that which Lessing assigned to art: to delight? I am not undervaluing that mission. Taken in Lessing's sense it involves an art that needs to attempt or to accomplish. It contains a distinct social purpose; having an independent important, elevated influence; an essential part of education, civilization and progress. I do not ask
therefore in any depreciating tone, but merely as a question interesting and appropriate, whether this is all the novelist can do? Can he without detriment to his artistic faculty set himself to solve some difficult social question or to preach down some evil influence? Is there any real use in producing that class of books which our readers can easily and distinctly identify if we call them, for a lack of a better generic title, Novels with a Purpose?

By novels with a purpose, I do not mean that an abstract idea shall be put into the form of a human allegory, nor should it be branded with an aphorism, nor must there be a moral; but there must be a direct and distinct purpose, sometimes this motif may be vaguely expressed; but in all alike, the story is not the end, only the means and it shone straw to realize George Eliot's ideal
of the intersect realms of Presentation with the highest idealism of conception.

All art has a purpose, which may be broadly defined as the presentation of truth in the form of beauty. Art is great and enduring in direct proportion to the universality of the truth it expresses and the grace of the form it chooses. If the truth transcends time, and the form follows deep, immutable instincts of harmony, the art will endure through all changes of custom and accidents of opinion; we shall have Homer forever singing the beauty of the physical life, the Gothic Cathedral forever praying upward, Dante forever disclosing the pilgrimage of the soul, Shakespeare forever revealing the relations and contrasts of character and circumstances.

With the novelist as an artist, the purpose is to present his motif as honestly as he
see it, and the value of his book is in direct proportion to the largeness of his vision and the fineness of his touch. At the highest, his work is poetic—i.e., beautifully and significantly true; at the lowest, it is journalistic—that is, true to fact, to sense. But in every case, with the authentic artist, it is true to the actual proportions of life. If a novelist does not show me that success may be the worst failure and failure the best success, that poverty may be better than riches, if he does not gather the scattered facts of life and show "the axis on which the frame of things turns"—he might as well leave for human nature to turn its eyes upon life itself. It is what Art is for, at its highest and I count him the greatest genius who teaches the divine chord in humanity and who teaches that the world is ruled in rightlessness.
It is easy, comparatively speaking, for a novelist to appeal to the emotions, but it is hard to appeal to the heart. This may sound somewhat contradictory at first, nevertheless there is truth in it. The outward emotions are in real life much more the expressions of the temperament than of what we call the heart. That we call the heart in each man and woman seems to mean the whole body of innate and inherited instincts, impulses and beliefs taken together, and in that relation to one another in which they stand after they have been acted upon through the individual's life by the inward vicissitudes and outward circumstances to which they have been exposed. Then, all this is quiescent, I think we call it Self, when roused to emotional activity, the Heart; but whatever we call it, it is to this Self or Heart that everything which is to this and
(and) therefore permanent must appeal.

The foundation of good fiction seems to be
ethical rather than aesthetic. Everything which
appeals to the taste, to the aesthetic side, may
ultimately perish as a mere matter of
fashion; but what speaks to man as man,
independently of his fashions, his habits and
his tastes must live and find a hearing
with humanity as long as humanity is
human.

The literature of the English people has always
had the idea that there is a necessary con-
nection between art and ethics. True, it has
contained many mischievous or frivolous
books; it has wandered between the austerity
of Bunyan and the license of the
dramatists of the Restoration; it has been
successively influenced by Roman, French,
Italian, Latin and Greek culture; but it
has never lost sight of the principle that
e book should have a definite purpose, a real reason for being, if it expects a long life.

Before the novel, the poem afforded our intellectual ancestors their means of amusement and in early English poetry the moral element was seldom lacking; and when fiction took the place of poetry as an intellectual amusement, the same principle held good.

It so happened that the growth of the English novel began when English society and religion were in a degraded state, but in the inden
cency and coarseness of the novel of the eighteenth century there still appeared something that is not French, not Italian, not Spanish. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, the novels were written merely for pleasure. ‘Bold bawdy and open manslaughter,’ says Addison, were their themes in the Elizabethan age, and it was not until the mothe of
Bunyan in the seventeenth century do we leave
The Knights of the Round Table and the princes and
princesses of Arcadia.

In the eighteenth century, we find that Richardson
and Fielding had their confessed moral and social
purposes, especially Fielding; but they subordinated
these to the story and to the play of character. Richardson
the precursor of the long-regnant school of senti-
mental novelists, spent his literary life.

in trying to show that integrity and uprightness
of the sentimental order are more attractive
than the vice of the 'town' in the era of the
Georgics. Fielding says pointedly in the preface
to Tom Jones that by displaying the beauty of
virtue he has attempted to convince men that
their true instinct directed them to a pursuit
of her. There was much given to good, sound
and simple moralizing of the Benjamin
Franklin kind and his Robinson Crusoe
is a moral Englishman abroad. Moralizing,
if not morality, is not absent from the lone layings of Steele, and Swift in his malignant half insanious way, at least had reforms in view. Goldsmith's pictures of virtuous rural life are still beloved because in Taine's phrase, "the chief of them unites and harmonizes in one character the best features of the manners and morals of the time and country, and excites an admiration and love for prime and orderly domestic and disciplined labours and rural life; Protestant and English virtue has not a more approved exemplar." Their romance prevailed with Mrs. Radcliffe, Horace Walpole, Mrs. Porter and the forgotten novelists of chivalry and mediasval history, whose fame was overshadowed by that of Scott, who in a romances pure and simple.

I think it undeniable that as a whole the fiction of the nineteenth century compared with that of the eighteenth, the ethical element in
the newer work outweighs that in the older. In England, the novel, with a purpose, began its
source with Miss Edgeworth, and she showed
that the facts and analogies of real life, afford
data materials for instuctive and even for
amusing fiction, more imaginary characters
and improbable adventures. She executed the
most delicate and difficult office of moral
fiction with greater ability and skill than
any of her predecessors or contemporaries; yet
all she has done, is but the type and shadow
of what Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Mrs.
Humphrey Stoddard has done. During the early
part of present century the movement towards
purposive fiction did not make much headway.
it's place was taken by the purposive poetry of
Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats; but as the century
advanced, gradually fiction began to think
and to teach, instead of merely amusing.
Bisraeli in "Tophil" anticipated our modern
tells about social problems and, although
Dickens and Thackeray's novels are preeminent
for character drawing, in Dickens we find
the purpose element promoting humanity
and good fellowship, and attacking abuses
in prisons, schools, law courts, and home
life. Thackeray, "whose eternal moral purpose
element" Mr. Paine unjustly scorns, loyally
attacks the social shame. The morality of
Thackeray's work is a work of art and this
idea is so justly and distinctly enunciated
by Hazlitt, who says: "The most moral writers
after all, are those who do not pretend to
inculcate any moral. The professed moralists
unavoidably degenerate into the partisans of
a system; and the philosopher is too apt
to warp the evidence to his own purpose. But
the painters of manners give the facts of
human nature, and leave me to draw
the inference; if we are not able to do this,

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or do it ill, at least it is our own fault."

Against this ray of genuine on the side of conscience moral intention, Carlyle mentions the name of Scott and deplores that "Beyond earning fifteen thousand a year to buy farme with, Scott contemplated no results from his novels." The man of any generation had less value than Scott for the immaterial part of his mission. This is not just, for Scott held his country dear and his purpose was to attempt something for his country which might introduce her to the world in a more favorable light than she had been placed and to procure sympathy for the virtues of her nation and indulgence for their foibles. He finds the purpose element in saddened but brave Charlotte and Emily Brontë in the result of "Jane Eyre"; in George Eliot, describing the few as she.
believed him to be in reality, doing justice to some righteousness of a moral drama, or telling how Lauranda became a Protestant in spite of herself. George Eliot held her gifts so earnestly as a minister that she was never tired of enforcing her lesson. "Great facts," says she, "have struggled to find a voice through me and have only been able to speak brokenly." George Meredith is a novelist of the philosophic school and is one of the boldest and ablest of his class in our day and anyone who follows him from "The Shaving of Shagpat" and "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" down to "Diary of The Crossways" and "One of Our Longines" cannot fail to observe the constant growth in importance of the underlying purpose.

What does all this mean? Is a book great because its moral purpose is sound, or is all
literature had as art and literature if it lacks the righteous purpose? Not at all, neither has English literature monopoly of righteousness and purpose. It means that this literature has insisted more strongly than others upon the necessary connection between art and ethics; that it has never prized or profited much beauty; and that so long as the world can be made better by literature, bookmakers can and ought to help. Between two books of equal literary merit, but of unequal purpose, it gives greater and more lasting favour to the more useful book. It believes that taste holds intimate relations with the intellect and the moral sense. Whether it is right or wrong, in this general idea, it is certain that any change in it, whether wrought by belief in "Art for Art's sake" by pseudo Greek poets, by cosmic Gods who sometimes confuse right and wrong, or by strictly realistic novelists,
will change a principle in accord with which
the race has acted for ten centuries.

The last decade or two, in particular, has
given us an increasing proof of the growth
in popularity of the novel with a purpose.
The appearance in a single year of three novels
of such power and charm as "Marcella,"
"Trilly," and "The Houseman" would go a long
way toward settling the question of purpose.
For they have the reach, the force and the vitality
of great novel writing; and they have
the contact with life, the varied skill, and
the rare and fullness of genuine art;
they are works of power and purpose. Whatever
we may think of "Marcella," we get a
sense of the range and volume of the
mystery we call life from the spectacle of
a nature so spacious passing through
experiences so various and so rich in
emotional and moral quality. "Trilly"
takes most men and women into a world so new to them that it has all the delight of a discovery and it is accepted as a protest against prevalent English and American Puritanism. The history of the deep and touching experience of Philip Christian in "The Moonstone" translates with compelling power the telling word Fate into the blessed word Providence.

During the past few years, we have been overwhelmed by stories like Mrs. Ward's—ravishing with moral lessons—and the popularity of these novels is a marvel to those who believe that the idea of the novel is to amuse; still, the fact remains that there essentially purposeful books, be they good, bad, or mediocre, have attained an enormous circulation in our own time, and have done so mainly on the strength of the purposes.
If one sets against these distinctively
prosperous successes, the successes of such
other writers as Rider Haggard, Anthony Hope,
Stanley Weyman, Conan Doyle, it will be
clear; I think, that the former class as
a whole marks the taste of adult men
and women, of the more thoughtful,
of the moulders of the coming century;
while the latter class as a whole marks
the taste of the youth and casual readers
of the conservative as against the progressive
element. I do not mean that Doyle and
Weyman have not done admirable work
of its kind; I merely mean that their work
as a rule does not aim at the highest
audience and even this is not true of
Doyle's work in all cases. Books on the
other hand, like Hardy's Tess and Jude
strike the keynote of our century. They are
instinct with our hopes, our fears, our
problems. They could not have been written in any age save this; while the same a Gentleman of France might almost equally have stepped out of some older coming. I do not deny that the romantic temperament and the love for books of adventure will always die on; but I believe side by side with these, the taste for books of thought and ethical teaching will always increase, and in an accelerated ratio. I think men and women will be less and less content like children with mere hearing of a story, they will demand from the novelist something that at the same time instincit and elevates them.

But where do I place Stevenson in this gallery of recent writers? Ah, Stevenson is — Stevenson, a great artist — perhaps more of an artist than Meredith and Hardy, though less of a thinker. Nevertheless, an artist.
He had his ideas, time, his rebellions, his fantasies, and these may often be read. Yet, I regard Stevenson as a survivor of the nineteenth century, then as a precursor and herald of the twentieth century. He was a semi-barbaric Scandinavian Celt of the Western Islands, at home at Skye and among the foam of the Atlantic. His boyishness with its concomitant love of adventure is one of his most charming and lovable characteristics and this childish side in him endeared him to all of us. But I cannot help thinking the adult and virile temperament of Meredith, the adult and civilized temperament of Hardy, is higher and deeper than the boyishness and delicious waywardness of the hermit of Samoa.

Kipling is undoubtedly a great force in our literature, a typical embodiment
of the instincts of the Englishman; but he
stands somewhat aside from either of
the main currents of the day. Nor do I desire
to class all writers as better or worse,
simply in so far as they happen to represent
or not to represent purpose in fiction;
nevertheless, I must say that, in a wider
sense, Kipling is too purposeful. His aim
is evangelical and his mission is daily
becoming more and more complex. It is
the mission of interpretation. He set out to
on extent as the literary exponent of
"The Romance of The Clash of Races". Our planet
is shrinking— and also expanding.
shrinking as regards distances and the
time taken to traverse them; expanding
as regards the number of nations, races,
creeds and moral codes. East and West
have joined hands; Egypt, Japan, South
Africa are part of us. Kipling has made
himself, on one side of his work, the laureate of the resulting strife and intermittence. In this direction, many other writers of the day may be classed with him—Stevenson in his Pacific stories, Rider Haggard in his wild South African tales, Kipling in his Morocco romance. I am not classing these writers together, as regards literary merit; I am merely grouping them into the same rough category as exponents, each on his own plane, of the ideas necessarily engendered by an age of rapid expansion. For making us grasp in its totality the vast and varied world is surely in itself an adequate purpose.

Closely allied with this group of quasi-purposeful authors whose vague shows the interest felt by the general reading public would place the other, and partially coincident group of authors who deal with outstanding factors or minor elements.
in our own domestic civilization. Time was when English fiction dealt mainly with the ladies and gentry of England, if more than that, then at least it concerned itself with the farmers of the Midland Counties, the rough Yorkshire moorlanders; but at the present time, the intense desire of half the world to know how the other half lives has produced a new type of fiction. Gargantua tells the West End all about the Jews in the slums of Whitechapel; Thomas Hardy transports me to the old-world cabin of Wessex peasants and moorlanders; William Black to the lochs of Highland crofters. And I hold that this tendency to minute specialization and localization is closely bound up with the compulsive tendency in fiction: both because the same men and women are engaged in either type and because the delineation of strange undercurrents.
and phase of human life is in itself educational.

Hardy, for example, who gave us "Far from the Madding Crowd," is also Hardy who gave us "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" and "Jude the Obscure". Hall Caine, who set before us the tale of Man and its Sorrows, in Hall Caine who approaches those same underlying problems of sex which form the main theme of Hardy and Meredith. Moreover, the passion for the description of local, rural and distinctly tribal or provincial life is closely bound up with the result of race, the settling and pervasive democratic movement which in Europe is bringing the Celt and the Slav to the front. Hence the modern Celt revival in Scotland, represented by Flora Macdonald; hence the Celtic revival in Ireland represented by Seán O'Casey and many vigorous new writers; hence the Scandinavian with its and the first group
Russian literature. This movement is also found in France with Guy de Maupassant. Is it not then a significant landmark in the same direction that England has read with deep attention Miss Mary Howitt's 'New England Tales' and Mrs. Harrold Frederic's 'Illumination'—in which forcible story we are transported on a carpet of fiction to a village in Northern New York, whose mention of Europe is not, yet where the self same problems of faith and life meet the local minister which meet every thinker in the world? Is it the purpose which makes such localized work universally interesting?

If we take Europe as a whole, I do not think we can doubt the constant progress of its literature in purposefulness during the past half century. From first to last, the nineteenth century has constantly demanded, and has constantly
been supplied with, more and more purposeful fiction. The demand and the supply still continue to increase; therefore I infer that the literature of the twentieth century in turn will be increasingly purposeful, and in being so, it will also be right. It will follow a law of literary development from the beginning of all things; for every literature begins with naive and somewhat childish narration—the myth, the epic, the fairy tale, the saga. As it progresses, it grows deeper, more philosophic, more ethical, more purposeful. The best never comes out of a civilized man, unless he is profoundly stirred by some overpowering social or moral emotion. The test of the higher as opposed to the lower art is just asking things' equal; the proportion of the philosophic and ethical interest to the mere aesthetic element. I do not mean to say, that the highest literature,
as literature, is the scientific lecture, the philosophic essay, the ethical pamphlet, and to guard against that misconception, I insert above the phrase "other things equal".

Literature must needs above all things be literary — it must have grace of style, beauty and aptness and novelty of wording; it must appeal first of all to the aesthetic sense, not to pure reason or the moral nature. But granting the presence of these purely literary qualities that literature is highest which most combines with them a deeper philosophic and moral value. This is not only true of English literature, but of all literature. And we all instinctively feel that the greatest and most poets and romancers are those who have taught the age somewhat, Wordsworth, not Scott; Shelley, not Byron. Even outside the more definite purposing work, we feel that relative height may
best be gauged by intensity of purpose. Rete himself when judged by this standard is really purposeful; for in a world to ideal to the worth of human beauty, he revived the Greek ideal of the simply beautiful. With Tennyson, his highest work is surely that which strives to realize some aspect of the philosophic and religious thought of the epoch he mirrored. Thus it is clearly seen that the greatest poems are those which mark time for humanity. A work of art, I admit, is not a pamphlet, or a proposition in English, but it must enclose a truth and a new truth, if it is to find a place permanently in the front rank of its own order. Even of other arts than literature, this is essentially true—Painting, Sculpture, Music to be truly great must create its own epoch. In literature, however, no work can be considered as
first-rate unless it teaches us something—
not merely pleases us. The critic who insists
on absence of purpose is shown—by the
greatest examples of the past, and by the
working of the time-spirit—to be an antiquated
anachronism. Undoubtedly, the novel without
a purpose will continue to be written for
the younger generation; but in the bient-
tieth century, I believe, the adult and educated
public will more and more demand
from its literary workers adult
interests, adult sympathies, a philosophic
aim, an ethical purpose.