

Subjective to Objective: A Career Pattern in Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Contemporary Women Novelists

BRUCE STOVEL

IT IS AN INTERESTING COINCIDENCE that the novel-writing careers of Jane Austen and George Eliot both fall into two halves, and furthermore that the same kind of development occurs from the early to the late novels in each case. The author moves from subjective to objective fiction: no longer wandering in fancy's maze, she stoops to truth and moralizes her song. This same two-part career can be seen in the work of several contemporary British women novelists, most notably Margaret Drabble and Barbara Pym; the idea also offers a way of understanding the changes of direction taken by Doris Lessing in her later novels. A survey of the careers of these novelists discloses a common pattern.

George Eliot is the clearest instance. It is commonly agreed that her novels fall into two groups: the early novels—*Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and *Silas Marner* (1861) which are autobiographical, nostalgic, intensely narrow in focus; and the later novels—*Romola* (1863), *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1872), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876)—which all present a social panorama and are more dispassionate, more concerned with social analysis. A complete change of tone and purpose can be felt in the later novels: the subtitle of *Middlemarch* is, not *Scenes of Provincial Life* (a subtitle which suits each one of the early novels), but *A Study of Provincial Life* (one that, in turn, fits each of the later novels). This change can be described as a move from subjective to objective fiction: a spontaneous delight in recreating one person's intense experience gives way to an analytical presentation of a larger social framework; a generous,

even celebratory, attitude to ordinary experience is replaced by a more intransigent holding of ordinary life to account.

These are generalizations about the mood and vision of Eliot's novels, but there are also clear differences of subject and form. The protagonists of the early novels are very young: Adam Bede still lives at home, Hetty Sorel is only 17, Maggie Tulliver dies before she can grow up. On the other hand, the central figures in the later novels are one stage further on: they are concerned with career decisions, with what to do after marriage. Furthermore, the later novels all take as their subject a whole society—the Florence of *Romola*, the Middlemarch which dominates the novel of that name—and, moreover, a whole society in the process of radical change: *Felix Holt* charts the changes of balance created in English society by the First Reform Bill (and, implicitly, by the Second); *Middlemarch* shows how British society changed from a conservative, land-based, hierarchical order to a more liberal, industrial, and democratic one in the years between 1829 and 1832. These changes of subject demand a different plot structure and a different narrative method. The early novels all have one plot: the Adam-Hetty-Arthur triangle in *Adam Bede*, the struggle of Maggie Tulliver against her environment in *The Mill on the Floss*, the regeneration of Silas Marner. By contrast, the later novels all have several plots: *Middlemarch*, for instance, has three plot centres: Dorothea Brooke, Tertius Lydgate, Fred Vincy. This plot change entails a changed narrative method. We shift from one plot centre to another in turn; of course, this roving focus is the way George Eliot creates both her social panorama and her dispassionate, reflective tone. In short, like Virgil and almost every major English poet, George Eliot began with pastoral and moved on to epic.

Jane Austen's output falls even more clearly into two halves, since a gap of more than ten years separates the composition of the three early novels—*Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Northanger Abbey*—from the three late novels—*Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Persuasion*. And the same sort of progression from subjective to objective can be traced, though in low relief, since Austen worked with a fine brush on little bits of ivory. The early novels are unperturbed in tone. *Pride and Prejudice*, as

Lionel Trilling and others have noted, regards the world in a spirit of forgiveness: whereas Elizabeth Bennet had come to believe that a "gulf impassable" separates her from Mr. Darcy, the novel ends with not only Darcy and Elizabeth, but Darcy, Elizabeth, Wickham, and Lydia all reconciled and bound together. The later novels, on the other hand, reveal a moral intransigence that insists on final distinctions: Maria Bertram dies in exile from Mansfield Park; Anne Elliott regrets at the end of *Persuasion* that she has no family to offer to Captain Wentworth, only her two friends, Lady Russell and Mrs. Smith. And, as everyone has noticed, the energy and exuberance of the early comic characters, of John Thorpe and Mr. Collins, is muted in the later novels, until Sir Walter Elliott of *Persuasion* is vestigially comic rather than actually so.

We can also see in the later Austen the same kind of change in subject and form that characterizes the later Eliot. The heroines of the later novels are not so much older — though Anne Elliott is 27 — as more burdened by moral responsibility. If the great heroine of the early novels is Elizabeth Bennet, whom no one can resist, her counterpart in the late novels is Emma Woodhouse, whom no one but her author can much like (or so Jane Austen is said to have said). Thus two of the three later novels, *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, are not comedies in which the heroines are self-deceived (as are all three early novels), but dramas in which a clear-sighted heroine confronts the difficulties of moral choice. And if the plot structure of the three late novels, like that of the early ones, traces the intertwined fortunes of two or three pairs of young lovers, this ancient comic pattern has a new, moral edge in the three later novels: Elizabeth's and Darcy's happy marriage is imaged as the combination of opposing extremes represented in the Collinses and Wickhams; Emma and Mr. Knightly are poised, not between two pairs of impulsive fools, but between two much more calculating, insidious, and dangerous pairs, the Eltons and the Frank Churchills. Jane Austen's later novels are not, as are George Eliot's, social panoramas, but there is in late Austen a new social concern, a new symbolism representing society as made up of inherently different worlds. *Mansfield Park* is essentially different from *Portsmouth*,

and people who grow up in either are different from those who grow up in London; small landowners like the Knightleys and the Woodhouses have nothing in common with the great landowners, the Churchills (who appear in *Emma* only by proxy, in Frank); Bath and Lyme, the decaying gentry and the navy, have nothing in common in *Persuasion*. And, finally, Austen's later novels are not only more explicitly social, but, like Eliot's, they show a new concern to chart social change. It is significant that *Persuasion* is the only one of the completed novels that depends upon its temporal setting — the summer and winter of 1814-15, with the Napoleonic wars just ended — and *Sanditon*, the unfinished novel that Jane Austen was writing at the time of her death in 1817, is even more explicitly concerned with the clash between traditional landed values and the new ethos of commerce.

The contemporary novelist Margaret Drabble bears some interesting resemblances to George Eliot (to whose *Middlemarch* she has recently written a paperback introduction). Like Eliot, she is an intellectual who was a student of literature before becoming a novelist (Drabble received a double starred first in the English Tripos at Cambridge); like Eliot, she is disconcertingly learned — *The Oxford Companion to English Literature (Fifth Edition)*, which she edited single-handedly, was published to favourable reviews in early 1985. But the most striking similarity to Eliot, I believe, is the progression from subjective to objective fiction noticeable in her novels. Drabble's first five novels, all published in the 1960's, are *bildungsromane* presenting the conflicts of one central consciousness; her four novels written in the 1970's all have a wide social canvas, social themes, and several central consciousnesses.

The five sixties novels — *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), and *The Waterfall* (1969) — are all intensely subjective in focus; four of the five, in fact, employ first-person narration, and the fifth, *Jerusalem the Golden*, is Drabble's *Sons and Lovers* or *Martha Quest* — her only connected account of a childhood and adolescence. This subjectivity reaches its extreme statement in the final novel of the group, *The Waterfall*: its

heroine, Jane Gray, is a poet who thinks and acts in images, and thus is always on the edge of solipsism. Drabble's next four novels — *The Needle's Eye* (1972), *The Realms of Gold* (1975), *The Ice Age* (1977), and *The Middle Ground* (1980) — are resolutely social in focus: it is during these years, in 1974, that Drabble published her biography of Arnold Bennett, a book which defends Bennett's kind of social realism.

The later Drabble novels display the same kinds of changes in subject and form that we have seen in later Eliot. The central characters are older (the latest heroine, Kate Armstrong of *The Middle Ground*, has children little younger than Sarah Bennett, the 21-year-old narrator of *A Summer Bird-Cage*); furthermore, the characters face questions like those in *Middlemarch* — what to do in an already-begun mature life — and not like those in *Adam Bede* or *The Mill on the Floss* (or Drabble's early novels) — how does a person reach maturity. As with Eliot, the later Drabble novels attempt to portray a whole society, and to chart that society in the process of radical change: this is why Frances Wingate of *The Realms of Gold* is an archeologist and her lover Karel a historian, why *The Ice Age* has the title it does, why *The Middle Ground* has such a varied and centrifugal cast of characters. This change in subject requires a change in form. The objective focus in the later novels is created by a third-person narration which, as in later Eliot, shifts by turns from one plot centre to another: all the later novels have more than one central consciousness and more than one plot. The fact that two of the later novels have a male as one of these central figures — Simon Camish of *The Needle's Eye*, Anthony Keating of *The Ice Age* — emphasizes Drabble's determination to write objectively about social themes and not simply to recreate her own experience. And there is a hardening of moral stance, an intransigence about good and evil, in the tone of these later novels: the property speculators of *The Ice Age* languish in the prison they have created; the reunited family of *The Needle's Eye* and the reclaiming of May Cottage in *The Realms of Gold* show that social good can still prevail. This quick survey of Drabble's development summarizes intention and purport, not achievement: I would argue that there is actually much more under-

standing of social change in Drabble's creation of her early heroines' dilemmas — for instance, that of Emma Evans in *The Garrick Year*, who must choose between her husband and her career — than in her grappling with the state-of-England question in *The Ice Age*.

Barbara Pym's novels are much more akin to Austen's than to Eliot's. They are filled with characters who have Austen names like Emma or Miss Bates, characters who speak in Austen dialogue and even Austen allusion: when Daphne Dagnall of *A Few Green Leaves* tells her brother Tom that she will no longer keep house for him, since she wants to buy a dog and be her own woman in Birmingham, he replies, "*Birmingham?* What is it about Birmingham — a place one has no high hopes of, or something like that? You must be joking." And, unlike Eliot and Drabble, but like Austen, Pym writes comic novels which glance obliquely at the big questions rather than confronting them directly. But the most striking resemblance for my purposes is that Pym's novels fall into two groups separated by a gap of more than ten years in her writing career. There are seven early novels, all high-spirited comedies: *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950), *Excellent Women* (1952), *Jane and Prudence* (1953), *Less Than Angels* (1955), *A Glass of Blessings* (1959), *No Fond Return of Love* (1961), and *An Unsuitable Attachment*, rejected by her publisher, Jonathan Cape, and by several other publishers, in 1963, and finally published in 1982, two years after Pym's death. And then there are the three late novels, written from 1974 onward, all more sombre, broader in focus, more rigorously moral in tone: *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), *The Sweet Dove Died* (1978), and *A Few Green Leaves* (1980).

Pym, like Austen, works in low relief, but, still, we can see the same sort of shift in subject and form from the early to the late novels. The central characters of the late novels are older: the foursome of *Quartet in Autumn* are in their sixties; Leonora Eyre of *The Sweet Dove Died* is coyly not quite fifty; the central characters of *A Few Green Leaves* are in late middle age. The late novels all attempt to depict a broader social world: Marcia and Norman of *Quartet in Autumn*, for instance, are uncultivated characters who would not appear in the early novels — or,

if so, only at their fringes; *A Few Green Leaves* portrays a country village as a single living organism. And the late novels are more concerned with large patterns of social change: the manor house in *A Few Green Leaves* has been sold by its traditional owners to wealthy non-residents, the descendants of the villagers now live in council housing, the village church has become a source of historical interest — the sort of place Philip Larkin might have been visiting in “Church Going.” And London appears in *Quartet in Autumn* as a city shrivelled by a neutron bomb: the buildings and institutions still stand, but the human and cultural tissues that connected these dry bones have vanished; in their place is the social worker and the memorial service.

The later Pym novels display corresponding differences in form. The early novels present a narrowly-focused story of one person, or of a pair of people: two are told in the first person (*Excellent Women* and *A Glass of Blessings*); two follow one central consciousness (*No Fond Return of Love*, *An Unsuitable Attachment*); two take the comic form of following alternately a contrasted pair of central characters (*Some Tame Gazelle*, *Jane and Prudence*). Only one of the early novels, *Less Than Angels*, has several plot centres and a roving point of view — as do all three of the later novels. These remarks apply less fully to *The Sweet Dove Died* than to the other two late novels, because that book is so closely — though not exclusively — devoted to the consciousness of its heroine. But even here we have an interesting gauge of the difference between the early and the late novels: Leonora Eyre of *The Sweet Dove Died* is an elegant, vain, spoiled, self-deceived woman of taste and wealth, just as is Wilmet Forsyth of *A Glass of Blessings*. But Wilmet gets to tell her own story and thus to charm us, as Leonora does not; Wilmet has a hidden better nature, as does Emma Woodhouse, and comes to reject her vain self at the novel’s end, whereas Leonora, some twenty years older than Wilmet, is invincible and incorrigible. The early novel has a prevailing mood of comic delight; the later one is dominated by a stern moral irony.

Doris Lessing, the most prominent of contemporary women novelists, conveys the distinction between subjective and objective fiction in one beautifully precise sentence; late in *Martha Quest*

(1952), Lessing says of her troubled teenage heroine, "She was, in fact, suffering from the form of moral exhaustion which is caused by seeing a great many facts without knowing the cause for them, by seeing oneself as an isolated person, without origin or destination." Martha, immersed in her own experience, cannot see the social patterns that give it form and meaning; unable to see causes and so assess responsibility, she is morally exhausted.

It might seem that Lessing is here predicting her own future development: she will progress during the *Children of Violence* series from the intensely subjective *Martha Quest* to a more socially concerned, morally alert form of objective novel, so that the final volume of the sequence, *The Four-Gated City* (1969), is less about its heroine than about the city (and civilization) in which she lives. But Lessing's career is more accurately described as a recurring attempt to achieve both kinds of fiction at once. After all, her first novel, the superb *The Grass is Singing*, has all the qualities of objective fiction, and the narrator's impatience with subjectivity becomes magnified into exasperation in *The Golden Notebook* (1962), where Anna Wulf, the novelist-heroine, reflects at one point that her successful coming-of-age novel, *The Frontiers of War*, was written "inside the subjective highly-coloured mist" of youth. On the other hand, though, Lessing insists on the necessity of subjectivity in mimetic fiction: her novels all observe the world through the prism of a woman's divided mind. As Lessing says in her 1971 preface to the paperback edition of *The Golden Notebook*: "There [is] no way of *not* being intensely subjective: . . . you couldn't write a book about the building of a bridge or a dam and not develop the mind and feelings of the people who built it." In the same preface, Lessing states that the only way for the foolish author to become wise is for her to persist in her folly:

The way to deal with the problem of 'subjectivity,' that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual . . . is to see him as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general, as indeed life always does: . . . growing up is after all only the understanding that one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares.

Lessing's remarks in 1971 are offered in explanation of *The Golden Notebook*, which she had written ten years earlier, but they seem to apply more accurately to her fiction of the seventies, and particularly to her very fine novel of 1973, *The Summer Before the Dark*. There, her impulses to write an objective account of modern society and to deepen her presentation of personal truth unite. The frame of the action is an objective novel about Kate Brown, a middle-class housewife who quite literally leaves her London suburb to see the contemporary world when she is hired by Global Food, an international agency. But beneath this voyage of self-discovery is another, parallel one embodied in Kate's recurring dream about a wounded seal that she is carrying in her arms, trying to find the northern sea so that she can restore it to its natural element. This subjective action is elemental, haunting, and over-determined — it resists any one rational explanation. The art of the novel lies in the interrelationship of the two plots: in the objective action, Kate returns to the home she had found so constricting at the outset; in the dream sequence, she returns the seal to the sea. Perhaps the suggestion is that she is now capable of choosing what had before been chosen for her; in any case, we know that each of these resolutions has only recurred because of the other one.

Austen and Eliot have been presented here, not as influences, but as embodying a common pattern of development, one that could be traced, without too much ingenuity, in the development of other contemporary women novelists who have written long enough and well enough to have an *oeuvre*: Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark come to mind. Austen and Eliot are analogues, not sources. After all, as the quotation from *Martha Quest* suggests, it is natural for people to become increasingly interested in the origins and destinations, the causes and responsibilities, detectable within their experience as they grow older. Like Tom Jones, we all, paradoxically, lose a certain prodigal openness to experience as our lives become broader and more complex. But, by another paradox, the resulting detachment allows us to understand that we are not isolated persons, without origin or destination, and that, in fact, "one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares."