Chapter Six

CONCLUSION

The theory of Impressionism in English novel examines primarily from sources in contemporary European fiction, philosophy and fine arts. The term as used by James, Conrad and Ford Madox Ford distinctly defines their position in the perspective of late nineteenth century fiction criticism. A new technique to present the special "vision" of the artist was considered to be the *sine qua non* of the impressionistic theory. Already in the writings of William James and Bergson and in the paintings of Courbet and Manet some parallelisms with the impressionism of Dostoevsky and Turgenev were noticed by perceptive minds. Thus, impressionism in English fiction is as much the result of cross-currents of inter-disciplinary movements as the product of the maturity to which this form had attained during its cavalcade of more than two centuries.

In the preceding chapters we have discussed in detail the cogitations and critical theory of the major Impressionists in English fiction. One thing that strikes us most is the note of modernity in their works. They were ill-content with ready-made ways of putting a story together as with ready-made ways of interpreting character. They not only revolutionised the traditional concept of fiction but also
brought to it some of the subtleties of pictorial and plastic art. Above all, wrestling with the mysteries of human psychology, they developed criteria suited to that elusive subject. The Impressionists were naturally inspired by the new psychology in their critical and creative ventures. The complex identity of the soul as revealed by psychology was tapped by them before the stream of consciousness school specialized in exhausting the "inner world". They were as much concerned as the old writers with the "psyche" as the focus of life experience. Only, with their modern conception of the "psyche", they have wanted new technical devices and new procedures for rendering it. Thus the Impressionists show a tendency to throw overboard terms intellectual, logical, sentimental. They rely more on impressions of the senses — on a more succession of sensations — for rendering the psyche. Their idea is, perhaps, to make the effect at the same time more real and less sharply defined.

As the theory of impressionism in the English novel is the result of the cogitations of creative writers, we can ill-afford to consider it in abstract or in isolation from their works of fiction. The tendencies in such show to what extent the correlation between theory and practice is possible.
Judging from the contemporary criticism of the novel we may safely claim that there is no one theory of fiction in England between 1880 and 1914, nevertheless, the Impressionist school stands distinct from the schools of Naturalists, Realists, Symbolists and mere traditional writers.

Our analytical survey of the factors determining the status of the novel and the new dimensions which were added during the period under review, i.e. 1880 to 1914 (Ch.1) have been confirmed and amplified in the detailed theories that followed. We have seen how the uncertainty about the status of the novel had diminished with stalwarts writing poetry and drama not in a position to challenge the supremacy of fiction. The novel had obviously gained considerably in stature by 1914 and the image was steadily built of its dominant position.

The Impressionists in fiction criticism steer clear of the extremes of Naturalism and Art for Art's sake-ism. They do not approve of Sola but they recommend a kind of realism as a literary method which includes such points as accuracy of details based on observation or impressions, a concentration on the familiar rather than the exceptional and as objective a view of life's data as the artist can achieve.
Their disagreement with "aesthetes" is not just for the rejection of their sensuousness and "escapism" but also because they present life in a way which does not accord with their ideal of "rendering". The regular development and inter-play of these two divergent views about the relation of the novel to life provide one of the most valuable dialectics of novel criticism.

The conception of morality in the critical writings of the Impressionist novelists shows their broad-minded and liberal attitude to life. The moral nature of the artist, his duty to avoid exciting our baser instinct, his guidance of our sympathies towards certain characters and away from others, his use of poetic justice, the general observance of "moral tone", the avoidance of pessimism and uncertainty as to mankind's destiny, are all consistently examined and prescribed. James thinks of morality as part of one's conception of life as a creative adventurer in a social world. Hardy extends the range of the novel by including "explosive material" which is necessary in the wider interest of social health. Conrad is never tired of reminding us of the values of "piety and renunciation" in a work of art. Obtrusive didacticism of contemporary Victorian fiction is as much despised by the Impressionists as the sensual flippancy of some of the French.
novelists. The ethics of the novel receives due attention of these artists because they have left Victorian prudishness far behind and are looking forward to the post-war phase of liberalism even permissiveness in social and individual life.

As "Impressionism" implies holding the prism up to nature, the critics obviously strain every nerve to highlight the importance of new devices and novel techniques to render life. The conventional concepts of plot and character undergo radical changes and the novel is viewed in terms of "structure", "point of view", "dramatis personae" and "style" which includes harmony of tones. Some of these theories were discussed by the late Victorian critics but they were discussed systematically and even exhaustively by the new writers. Having imbibed divergent influences from different disciplines, they thought of novel-writing as something of a composite art capable of all nuances of literary craftsmanship. James rejected the old conception of the Novel of Action and the Novel of Character. To him the "impression" was the be-all and end-all of all artistic venture. Conrad and Ford viewed the whole problem of technique in a more radical manner. Their cogitations throw light on the conception of each of the constituents of the novel as integral parts of a unified whole. Another
remarkable tendency of criticism, that in favour of the novel's structural unity, as unity like that of an organism or of music, is seen to be moving gradually towards a conception of the vital inter-relation of all parts, including character and plot and eventually towards a recognition of autonomy.

The Impressionist view of technique is further clarified when we place them before the succeeding generations of writers — the stream of consciousness school. The Impressionists and the post-Impressionists were, strictly speaking, realists in a special sense. Their concern for landscape and in-scape effects and the passive subjection of their imaginations to the inflow of impressions constitutes their brand of realism. James Joyce is often spoken of as having propounded the theory of the lyrical, the epical and the dramatic forms of novel and his preference for the last form, i.e. dramatic or objective novel is highlighted in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. But to serious students of Impressionist critical theory, James Joyce's thesis offers nothing new. The whole gamut of theories developed after 1880 offer suggestive discussions on objectivity, dramatization, selection and discrimination in the technique of fiction. The aims of James and Conrad coincide in as
much as they are concerned with the rendering of a special kind of truth seen through their special temperament and set in a particular light. The post-Impressionist is not primarily concerned with the representation of nature. His aim is, out of elements derived from nature, to make an abstract composition for rendering some truth of his own conceiving. His truth may be of the utmost significance in the ideal world, but it is not necessarily a fact of nature. He may ignore or amend perspective which is an attribute of three-dimensional nature. Any new dimension taken into account brings in a new perspective. His abstract design may involve a measure of deformation or conventionalization of the objects presented.

The Impressionist theory of fiction seldom advocates such "abstract design" which found vogue in the post-war literary creations, especially in novel.

The significance of this study lies precisely in finding the basic facets of novel-criticism and their application to creative writings of the critics. Placed as the Impressionists are in the transitional phase of the development of the novel, they are neither iconoclasts nor ardent prophets of the future. They reject the typically Victorian notions of novel-writing to suit the modern
sensibility and yet they accept certain tenets of their aesthetics which will be found to be value in all ages to come. They are the exponents of "subjective drama" in novel and yet they seldom hold a plea for mere sensations and memories or internalization of the external. Both in theory and practice, they evince a measure of sanity and balance. Theirs is the ideal of subjective - objective depiction of life as seen through their special temperament.

The pre-Impressionist critic of fiction generally compared the mind of the novelist to a reflector of external objects — holding the mirror unto nature. The Impressionist may be likened to a radiant projector which makes a contribution to the objects it perceives. The first of these (the mirror) was characteristic of much of the thinking of the Victorian mind; the second (the lamp) typifies the new conceptions of the poetic mind of the Impressionist. The new critics advocate a judicious and harmonious fusion of matter and method. They see no dichotomy between spontaneous rendering of impressions and thoughtful planning for a work of art. Technique for them is a means to an end and not an end by itself. Fiction in their hands becomes a fine art which may imbibe the best of poetry, drama, music and sculpture
or architecture and yet it remains an art quite distinct from the others enjoying its special status. The truth which must finally emerge from any history of novel-criticism is that the ultimate use of theoretical enquiry is to lead us back to the work of art itself. Our study of the critical theory of the Impressionists in the light of their creative writings does reveal certain aspects of their art which have not been highlighted so far in their correct perspective and which, therefore, need to be investigated for a better appreciation of their works.