1. The Period — (C) The pre-Sterne Novel

We have traced some currents in the thought of the 18th century, insofar as they provide a background to the work of Sterne. We may note here the condition of the particular form of literature, namely, the novel, when our author was expressing himself in this form.

Though Richardson once described himself to an admirer as 'a very irregular writer', having 'no plan' of work, he knew very well what he was doing in his *Pamela*. He wrote to a friend about its composition —

"I thought the story, if written in an easy and natural manner, suitable to the simplicity of it, might possibly introduce a new species of writing that might possibly turn young people into a course of reading different from the pomp and parade of romance-writing, and dismissing the improbable and the marvellous, with which novels generally abound, might tend to promote the cause of religion and virtue".2

The 'newness' of Richardson lies in a descent into common and real life, from the unreality of the romances. It lies in a naturalness — both in the characters and narration of the story, and — what is more important — in the truth of sentiment. Defoe's stories draw their life mainly from the adventure-interest of the old romances — though he may sometimes place his characters and action in realistic settings (as, for example, in *Moll Flanders*). It would not be correct, of course, to say that Defoe's stories have nothing but story-interest. As she tells her disgraceful and sad story, *Moll Flanders* reveals throughout, her awareness of her mental conflict, of the desolation of her soul. She speaks thus of her life at Newgate —
"I had a weight of guilt upon me, enough to sink any creature who had the least power of reflection left, and had any sense upon them of the happiness of this life, or the misery of another. I had at first some remorse indeed, but no repentance; I had now neither remorse nor repentance. ... I had the name of an old offender, so that I had nothing to expect but death, neither had I myself any thoughts of escaping; and yet a certain strange lethargy of soul possessed me. I had no trouble, no apprehensions, no sorrow about me; the first surprise was gone; I was, I may well say, I know not how; my senses, my reason, nay, my conscience, were all asleep ..."3

As a piece of self-analysis, this is admirable. Even in Robinson Crusoe, a pure adventure-story, Defoe shows no little character-interest; for example, Crusoe, in the very beginning of the story, analyzes his mental state, after the ship-master has advised him to go back home. He says —

"As to going home, shame opposed the best motions that offered to my thoughts; and it immediately occurr'd to me how I should be laugh'd at among the neighbours, and should be ashamed to see, not my father and mother only, but even every body else; from whence I have since often observed, how incongruous and irrational the common temper of mankind is, especially of youth, to that reason which ought to guide them in such cases, viz. that they are not asham'd to sin, and yet are asham'd to repent; not asham'd of the action for which they ought justly to be esteemed fools, but are asham'd of the returning, which only can make them be esteem'd wise men".4

There is a similar detailed analysis of his mental condition and feelings made by Crusoe, while on board the storm-tossed ship. Indeed, analysis of his mental state, of his motives and action, his 'cogitations, apprehensions, and reflections', marks Crusoe's narration of his 'Life and Adventures' throughout. In the same way, we find in Gulliver's Travels something more than pure adventure-interest. Kettle, for instance, regards this story as a 'moral fable', 'expressing Swift's moral criticism of his world'.

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Well before Kettle, Thackeray had regarded *Gulliver's Travels* as a 'moral fable' too. Said Thackeray—

"As for the humour and conduct of this famous fable, I suppose there is no person who reads but must admire; as for the moral, I think it is horrible, shameless, unmanly, blasphemous"; the 'moral' of the tale, according to Thackeray, is 'the worthlessness of all mankind'. Nevertheless, with all their psychological or moral significance, it is principally the adventure-interest that gives life to Defoe's and Swift's stories. Detailed analysis of character and feeling, in a setting of common human relationships, which characterizes the modern novel, becomes all-important with Richardson. Rousseau was right, when he said, while commenting on the success of his *Julie*, that analysis of the human heart is the true business of the novelist—

"one must know how to analyse properly the human heart, in order to disentangle the true feelings of nature".

Till the early 18th century, the romances had their day. From our modern point of view, we can easily see their insufficiency. Their characters and action were unreal. Mrs. Barbauld well points out that these old romances of chivalry

"heightened the traditionary adventures of the heroes of their different countries, with the more wonderful stories of giants, enchantments, and other embellishments of the supernatural kind. In those times talismans, and wounds cured by sympathetic powder, and charms of all kinds, were seriously credited".

The two principal elements in these romances were love and courage, both of which lacked reality. Love had little resemblance to a natural passion, and little relevance to real life. And courage was bombastic; it was— to use Sterne's words said in a
different context - 'like a Spanish soldier upon an Italian stage - a bladder full of wind'. Lord Chesterfield wisely advised his son to avoid the

"absurd romances of the last two centuries, where characters that never existed are insipidly displayed, and sentiments that were never felt pompously described". 13

The romances were discredited in the 18th century mainly for two reasons: (i) A growing interest in the life of the common people, as a result of the success of the two political revolutions - one about the middle, the other towards the close, of the 18th century; (ii) Rejection of the epical code of honour, following the rise of the importance of feeling (see ante, Chap. II). Honour now consisted in the generous sentiment, not in a heroic deed of conquest. A liberal and humanistic interpretation of religion, which emphasized virtue rather than faith, arose in the 18th century (see ante, Chap. I & II). All this pointed to the primacy of feeling. Even man's reason, the triumph of which had been declared by scientist Newton and philosopher Locke, pointed - in the sphere of religion and morality - to the heart, or conscience, as the seat of virtue and the motive-force of will and action. The philosophy of feeling discredited theology, or at least neutralized its ruling power, and provided great strength to humanism. This inevitably dispersed the fog of romances, and set the novel on the road to real life, at the same time grafting into it a moral motive.

It is interesting to note that Horace Walpole, even when he resuscitated the old romance in his Castle of Otranto (1764), had to take the plea, in his Preface to the First Edition, that his book was a translation of an old Italian romance
of the early 16th century, when 'miracles, visions, necromancies, dreams, and other preternatural events' had not disappeared from the story. In his Preface to the Second Edition, in which he owned his authorship of *Otranto*, Walpole said that his work was a blend of "the two kinds of romance: the ancient and the modern. In the former, all was imagination and improbability; in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success ... the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life". He pleads his conformity to nature, particularly in his portrayal of the 'domestics'. In practice, however, Walpole does not very much succeed here. The sentiments expressed by the servants seem to be more superficial than real. After the death, for example, of the young Conrad in supernatural circumstances, Bianca, princess Matilda's maid, is saying to Matilda (who is Conrad's sister) —

"Oh, madam, ... As you are become his (i.e., Manfred's) heiress, he is impatient to have you married. He has always been raving for more sons; I warrant he is now impatient for grandsons. As sure as I live, madam, I shall see you a bride at last. Good madam, you won't cast off your faithful Bianca: you won't put Donna Rossara over me, now that you are a great princess!"

And when Matilda is worried over her father's 'causeless severity' towards her mother, the maid says —

"Oh, madam, all men use their wives so, when they are weary of them".

Such sentiments, expressed on the tragic occasion of the death of Matilda's only brother, are not true to nature. Even so, Walpole's pleading of conformity to nature is significant. Walpole introduces also a moral tone, which — he says — distinguishes his story from the violent spirit of the old romances. This
(Johnsonian) morality is sought to be emphasized towards the close of the story, where the author, by the example of the repentance and spiritual transformation of Manfred the tyrant, points out to us, through the words of the good wife of Manfred, 'the vanity of human greatness'.

Thus the novel became modern when it acquired a basis in real life. The 18th century novel may be broadly divided into two kinds, in accordance with the use of this reality. One used reality in the objective sense. Such novels, drawing on the contemporary scene, portrayed manners, and presented a panoramic view of the society in its social and moral aspects. Of this kind are the novels of Fielding, Smollett, though their methods may be different. Fielding says that he has "writ little more than I have seen". Sir Walter Scott aptly described Fielding as the 'painter of national manners'. Hazlitt found in Fielding's novels an authentic picture of the contemporary society; he called Joseph Andrews 'a perfect piece of statistics in its kind'. The great historian Gibbon was enamoured of Tom Jones - 'that exquisite picture of human manners', as he called it. Fielding himself valued his work on that account. He stated that he described 'not men, but manners; not an individual, but a species'. Smollett followed Fielding's episodic manner. He reveals a more vigorous and a grosser kind of realism. Goldsmith, too, is interested mainly in the portrayal of society - as can be seen also from his poems and essays. His well-known novel, The Vicar of Wakefield, is a fine portrait of rural life and home-life - the surroundings of which he had been familiar with in his childhood.
The other kind of novels— for example, those of Richardson— used reality in the subjective sense. In other words, in such novels the truth of presentation mainly relates to the world of inner thought and feelings of the characters. The endless analysis of feelings and mental states in Pamela or Clarissa may bore us, if we read the novel for the story, but this analysis is of capital importance for revealing a character, the identity of which lies— as Locke pointed out— in his (or, her) mental life. Ian Watt finds the characteristic of the modern novel, as of modern philosophy, in particularization. Descartes started modern philosophy by rejecting the old method of deducing from universals and from dogma, and by stressing the method of individual enquiry (Cogito, ergo sum, i.e., "I think, therefore I am"), which alone can find out truth. This individualist spirit of philosophic realism is reflected in the novel of Defoe, who based his story on individual experience. His rejection of traditional plots and

"total subordination of the plot to the pattern of the autobiographical memoir is as defiant an assertion of the primacy of individual experience in the novel as Descartes' Cogito, ergo sum was in philosophy."27

The modernity of literature lies in this stress on individual experience and impressions.

Whereas Defoe achieves this in the verisimilitude of physical detail, Richardson does it in the verisimilitude of mental detail. One advantage in the presentation of this mental detail was provided by the letter-form of Richardson, presenting the situation immediately after its occurrence and from the
point of view of the character involved. As Richardson himself says in his Preface to Clarissa:

"Much more lively and affecting must be the style of those who write in the height of a present distress; the mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty (the event then hidden in the womb of fate), than the dry, narrative, unanimated style of a person, relating difficulties and dangers surmounted, can be; the relation perfectly at ease ...".28

Thus, the subjectivity initiated by Descartes for modern philosophic enquiry makes the life of the novel of Richardson, and - as we shall see later - of that of Sterne, to a larger extent and in a deeper sense.

We may say, therefore, that when Sterne began writing his Tristram Shandy (in 1759), broadly two types of the novel had come to the field - which let us call (i) Fieldingian, the preoccupation of which is portrayal of manners, and (ii) Richardsonian, the main concern of which is detailed documentation of mental states and feelings. With all the epical and compact form of Fielding and his greater reputation as a novelist, it must be admitted that Richardson's art had one potential advantage over Fielding's, for the future of fiction. Coleridge, who greatly admired Fielding for his plot-construction, rightly noted that Fielding

"failed in comparison with Richardson who perpetually placed himself, as it were, in a day-dream".30

Though the contrast between Fielding and Richardson is not elaborated, by this 'day-dream' Coleridge obviously means subjective preoccupation, 'that ensouling of observation by meditation' - as he calls it, as contrasted with Fielding's mere record of observation;

"for the principal and only genuine excitement ought
Richardson's minute recording of mental states - in the letters of Pamela and others, opened up for fiction vast possibilities of expansion in psychological realism. The characteristic of the modern novel lies in a 'greater penetration into the human psyche' - as Stang puts it. Virginia Woolf called H.G. Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy 'materialists', because they use their great skill on what she considers to be unimportant things, namely, story-telling, love-interest, tragedy, comedy, and so on. These things do not portray true life. This true life is in the incessant fall of impressions of all kinds on our mind; and the real business of the novel is to

"record the atoms as they fall upon the mind, in the order in which they fall ... (to) trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness".

Though Richardson is a far cry from the modern novelists, we find clear beginnings in him of the emphasis on the extensive mental life of the characters. Sterne, following Locke, was drawn to the psychological manner of Richardson, rather than to the episodic manner of Fielding. (The distinct character of Sterne's technique will be discussed in a later Chapter - Ch.X)