

## THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN MODERN ENGLISH FICTION

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It is the aim of this study to offer a survey of the most outstanding characteristics of the English University novel in the twentieth century, since this is a type of fiction that has undoubtedly been developing in a very interesting way in recent years, not least because, contrary to what occurred in the nineteenth century, some of England's most distinguished modern novelists have been attracted to this *genre*.

Now the term *genre* is used here deliberately since the University novel — that is, a novel partially or completely set against a University background, whose plot deals with typical academic activities, and having as its protagonist a University student or teacher — may be legitimately described, it is felt, as belonging to a specific literary *genre*. It is, in fact, a type of fiction which has been written in England for some one hundred and fifty years now, and which became especially popular in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The term «University novel» should not, however, perhaps, be applied until reference is made to post-1945 fiction, since the immense majority of such books published previous to that date deal almost exclusively with life at Oxford. In fact, up till 1955, approximately 85% of English University novels are set in Oxford, almost all the rest being located in Cambridge. Durham, London, Manchester and Cardiff Universities, of course, were all founded in the nineteenth and sixteenth centuries, but none of these seats of learning were used as settings for novels of academic life. It is interesting to note, in this context, that Edward Bradley, author of one of the more successful nineteenth century University stories, *The Adventures of Mr. Verdant Green* (1853), who was educated himself at Durham University, and used as a pseudonym «Cuthbert Bede» (the names of the two patron saints of Durham), situated his college stories in an Oxford setting.

Presumably, Oxford's traditional insistence on classical learning and literature has been more conducive to producing novelists than Cambridge's devotion to science and mathematics: it is worth noting that Cambridge's most outstanding chronicler — C. P. Snow — started off as a scientist, albeit a scientist interested in reconciling «the two cultures», and in bridging «the gulf of mutual incomprehension» existing between scientists and literary intellectuals (1), as he puts it. Old Oxonians certainly seem to have looked back on their undergraduate days with more *articulate* nostalgia than their Cantab counterparts.

In fact, one of the most interesting developments of the post-1945 novel of aca-

demical life is that it does, at last, free itself from the Oxbridge setting, precisely because the novelists themselves are no longer necessarily Oxbridge graduates. The traditional nineteenth century University novels were almost all written, of course, by authors who had themselves been to Oxford and could, therefore, describe scenes and activities, and, indeed, types, with which they were familiar.

Now, this need for a familiarity with the University background as a *conditio sine qua non* for the composition of University stories, does explain, of course, why, in fact, none of the great Victorian novelists dealt with the theme on any serious scale: only five of the leading Victorian novelists — Thackeray, Charles Reade, Sir Walter Scott, R. L. Stevenson and Lewis Carroll — went to University, and of these, only Thackeray touched on the academic theme, in *Pendennis* (1848-50), in which, incidentally, he coined the term «Oxbridge». The others either could not study because they were women — Jane Austen, Mrs. Gaskell, the Brontës, George Eliot — or, like Dickens, Trollope, Meredith, Gissing, Hardy, Moore, etc. were deprived by poverty of this privilege. Some of these authors did, of course, make favourable or unfavourable *passing* references to Oxbridge in their works: in *Barchester Towers* (1857), Trollope defines Mr. Arabin as «the double distilled quintessence of University perfection», whereas Hardy, in *Jude the Obscure* (1895) refers disparagingly to the gloom and decay of Oxford. Benjamin Disraeli, who was not a University man, refers cuttingly in *Contarini Fleming* (1832) to the uselessness of a University education which consisted of «a deplorable and disgusting study of a small collection of imperfect books written by Greeks, and preserved by Goths». None of these authors, however, except Thackeray, ever really dealt with academic themes in their books, and the great quantity of Oxford novels — over eighty in all — which appeared in the nineteenth century under such titles as *The Oxford and Cambridge Eights* or *Oxford Days, or How Ross got his Degree*, were produced by minor writers, with a B.A. or an M.A. after their names. The great Victorian novelists too, probably kept away from the University theme, not only because they were personally unacquainted with it, but also, precisely because the traditional content of such fiction, in the hands of mediocre writers, seemed to be lacking in literary prestige.

The twentieth century University novel represents, therefore, the continuation of a tradition established over a century and half ago: indeed, references to University life and types abounded in the Renaissance, and the seventeenth century, and eighteenth century periodical literature — the *Tatler*, Dr. Johnson's *Rambler*, etc. — frequently contained adverse commentaries on Oxbridge life, and offered portraits of typical Oxbridge types, both dons and students: the pedantic but boorish scholars, lacking in all the social graces, contrasting with the elegant young rakes — «the fast set» — as it was later to be called, full of social *savoir-faire*, but given to the frequenting of taverns and barmaids, rather than lecture-halls and tutorials. Indeed, this «fast set/studious set» dichotomy was still being evoked as late as 1945 in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, although, it will be remembered, this is a novel of «reminiscence».

Indeed, the wicked lives led by the «fast set» is depicted in what might well be considered the first story of English University life — the story told by the Man of the Hill, with a moralizing intention, in Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749). The narrator, it will be remembered, tells how he was debauched by a rich young profligate, eventually turned to theft and was obliged to leave Oxford. In fact, Fielding's portrayal

of Tom's tutors, Thwackum and Square, is no mean criticism of the graduate products of eighteenth century Oxbridge! The theme of the young man succumbing to evil influences at University was to become a constant of University fiction and was still being exploited, in 1945, in Philip Larkin's *Jill*.

Nineteenth century University fiction can be classified roughly into three types (2): firstly, novels of rowdyism, which present the student as jokester and spend-thrift, hostile towards the University authorities and his more studious companions. This boisterous tradition is perhaps best exemplified by the four chapters concerning Oxbridge life in Thackeray's *Pendennis*. Some of the topics of the «rowdy» novel have entered into twentieth century University fiction: undergraduate rags and hoaxes, initiation ceremonies for freshmen, and, above all, a certain spirit of all — boys — together comradeship, a certain «boys will be boys» idealization and tolerance of the rowdy life, accompanied by a complete alienation from, and, generally, contempt of, women.

The years between 1825 and 1875 were marked by a series of reforms of the University system, concerning the curriculum, examinations, appointments of dons and the admission of students, and the University novel being, of course, essentially documentary in nature, reflects these changes. It begins to deal with specifically academic activities in a realistic way: examinations, literary prizes, debating societies, etc. In earlier novels, examinations, for example, and the pursuit of scholarship were not emphasized, because the majority of the students came from the privileged classes with well-defined clerical or landowning careers before them, so they were not dependent on their examination results in any dramatic way. The reformed system of student admission implied the arrival of a more serious kind of student, who begins to be the hero of realistic «reform» novels, and who frowns upon the «fast set». In some novels, the hero is at first corrupted by the «fast set», but is then reformed, and reaches to high attainments, both scholarly and athletic (*Tom Brown at Oxford*, 1861, by Thomas Hughes, for example). By the 1870's too, the University found itself the centre of a lively discussion by educationists and scholars concerning the function of the University. Questions were asked about the utility of a University education, about what should be the aims of such an education, and, above all, about whether a liberal education or a useful scientific one was to be preferred. Scientists, like Thomas Huxley, and practical philosophers, like Herbert Spencer, pressed for a scientific and utilitarian education, liberal humanitarians, like Cardinal Newman and Matthew Arnold, championed the argument that only liberal learning could nurture the spirit, that a University should aim at refining the spirit and perfecting the intellect of the undergraduate, rather than filling him with practical knowledge. As Newman expressed it in his essay on *The Idea of a University Defined*, 1873:

«Liberal Education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman. It is well to be a gentleman, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing on the conduct of life; —these are the connatural qualities of a large knowledge; they are the objects of a University» (3).

For the humanitarians, then, the University should afford the student the atmosphere for an enlightened and dispassionate search for truth in all fields of knowledge,

and Newman insisted that such an atmosphere could be created *only* within a University *community*, i.e. within, therefore, the Oxbridge collegiate system, since he felt that «... the free mixing together of a multitude of young men, keen, openhearted, sympathetic and observant as young men are» (4) was more conducive to this process of intellectual perfection than attendance at lectures or intensive study. This theory of the community-value of University life became one of the constants of pre-1945 Oxbridge fiction, and was to be implicitly defended and attacked, in 1945, by, respectively, Evelyn Waugh and Philip Larkin. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century University novels do reflect this new, rather romantic attitude which may be summed up as «the cult of Oxford»: in such works, there is an exaltation of intellectual prowess, of a disinterested search for knowledge, although at the same time, the hero does often obtain literary prizes and «brilliant Firsts», academic feats which he carries off with an air of nonchalance, accompanied frequently by that excessive dandyism and social savoirfaire which had characterized the «fast set» in the earlier novels. Indeed, so exaggeratedly gilded were some of these portraits that they became the object of goodnatured parody by writers, such as, for example, Max Beerbohm. Another innovation of these romantic novels, was the introduction of excellent dons: the perspective is still the undergraduate perspective but dons begin to be at least mentioned with respect and sympathy. One of the most outstanding differences between the modern University novel and its predecessors, is that, in these latter, we learn nothing of the problems or the aspirations of the dons: they are written from the undergraduate standpoint because, of course, the writers themselves are not dons, but graduates recording their own youthful impressions. In the post-1945 period the perspective tends to shift from the students to the professorate, precisely because many of the novelists are University teachers themselves.

At the turn of the century, then, the University novel was dedicated to the exclusively masculine collegiate life of Oxford and Cambridge: if there is a love interest, it will be introduced sporadically, when the hero is on Long Vacation, or when some other «fellow's sister» comes up for Eights Week. It is a novel written from the student perspective and dedicated to exalting the community-value of male comradeship and its potential for forming and refining the intellect and the spirit of the undergraduate.

This material was obviously attractive, and of the sixty or more University novels (or novels incorporating academic themes) published in England in the twentieth century, not a few were written by novelists whom we must consider as among the foremost fiction writers of the modern age: E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Compton Mackenzie, Evelyn Waugh, Angus Wilson, C. P. Snow, William Cooper, Kingsley Amis, Malcolm Bradbury, David Lodge, etc.

As early as 1907, for example, E. M. Forster, just ten years after going up to Cambridge, published his second novel, *The Longest Journey*, which is, in fact, a «cult of Cambridge» novel. The book is dedicated, significantly, «Fratribus» (i.e. to his old undergraduate friends), and is divided into three parts, the first being called «Cambridge». The whole novel may, however, be considered a University story since it does, in fact, deal with the clash between the Cambridge-inspired values upheld by the hero, Rickie Elliot, and his friend Ansell, and the Philistine attitudes of his wife and her family. The book opens with what we may recognize as a representative tableau of Oxford or Cambridge student life at the turn of the century: a group

of young men are having a philosophical discussion, in Rickie's room, concerning «the existence of objects». Into this comfortable scene bursts Agnes, Rickie's future wife, who is immediately felt by this closely-knit masculine group, this *symposium*, to be both alien and hostile. When her footsteps are heard, everyone whispers «in agitation», «Ladies!», and Rickie's friends begin «to fly from his visitor like mists before the sun». Rickie's clever friend, Ansell, sees Agnes, like all women, as a menace, and female submission to biological needs is harshly contrasted with the speculative, disinterested and civilized spirit of these young philosophers. Writing philosophers. Writing to Rickie, Ansell affirms:

«I have read in books — and I cannot afford to despise books, they are all that I have to go by — that men and women desire different things. Man wants to love mankind; woman wants to love one man. When she has him, her work is over. She is the emissary of Nature, and Nature's bidding has been fulfilled. But man does not care a damn for Nature — or at least only a very little damn. He cares for a hundred things besides, and more civilized he is the more he will care for these other hundred things, and demand not only a wife and children, but also friends, and work, and spiritual freedom» (5).

It is an attitude which will be recognizable to those familiar with Bernard Shaw's great polemical preface to *Man and Superman!*

Ansell's reference, in his letter, to books, underlines another of the essentially academic themes touched on in *The Longest Journey* — the search for truth through learning, and of scholarship for scholarship's sake: Forster evokes Ansell's own aspirations in the following lines:

«Ansell was in his favourite haunt — the Reading Room of the British Museum. In that book-encircled space he always could find peace... There he knew that his life was not ignoble. It was worthwhile to grow old and dusty seeking for truth though truth is unattainable, restating questions that have been stated since the beginning of the world. Failure would await him, but not disillusionment. It was worth while reading books, and writing a book or two which few would read, and no one, perhaps, endorse» (6).

Ansell's voice, throughout the novel, is the authoritative voice of clear-sightedness and uncompromising honesty, and it is he who in a way liberates Rickie from the spiritual mediocrity of his married life.

At the end of the Cambridge section of *The Longest Journey*, Rickie's Cambridge — induced sense of values is put to the test when he has to choose between acknowledging, or keeping silent about, the existence of an illegitimate half-brother: under Agnes's snobbish, petty bourgeois influence, he fails the test, that is, keeps silent, although still protesting feebly about his duty to «Truth». From this point onwards, says Forster, «He deteriorates... He remained conscientious and decent, but the spiritual part of him proceeded towards ruin» (7). From this spiritual decay he is eventually redeemed by Ansell who represents the spirit of Cambridge throughout the book, albeit to die, whilst dragging his drunken half-brother from

under the wheels of a train; the death, however, is not conceived of as tragic, because in this action Rickie is performing the rule of service to others that his Cambridge formation has prepared him for.

As was observed above, this tendency to over-romanticize, perhaps, the novelist's memories of Oxbridge, was caricatured in 1911 with great wit and humour by Max Beerbohm, himself an Oxford graduate, in his delightful fantasy, *Zuleika Dobson, or An Oxford Love Story*. The story tells of the devastating effect which a beautiful adventuress, granddaughter of the Warden of Judas (!) College, has on the flower of Oxford youth, who, with the Duke of Dorset at their head, all drown themselves together in the Isis, to prove their love for her, after seeing their College boat win against Magdalen College. The beautiful Zuleika is accustomed to such tributes, although not on such a massive scale: Russian Dukes and German Princes have proposed to her, and:

«On the Sunday before she left Madrid, a great bull-fight was held in her honour. Fifteen bulls received the coup de grâce and Alvarez the matador of matadors, died in the arena with her name on his lips. He had tried to kill the last bull without taking his eyes off *la divina señorita*. A prettier compliment had never been paid her, and she was immensely pleased with it» (8).

The book is, of course, as Beerbohm called it, a «fantasy», and the work of the most famous caricaturist of his day; none of the topics of the cult of Oxford escape his parodic pen: his aristocratic hero, the Duke of Dorset, is an Oxford superman who has won all the literary prizes, has obtained «a brilliant First» in *Literae Humaniores*, paints watercolours and plays the piano like a professional, speaks «all modern languages fluently», is enormously elegant and, faithful to Arnold's ideal of *mens sana in corpore sano*, is a first class athlete and sportsman. The Oxford background is delightfully and vividly portrayed, and the ups and downs of the Duke's amorous hopes are registered in the changing expressions of the Roman Emperors outside the Sheldonian Theatre. A great deal of fun is had at the expense of the American Rhodes scholar — the differences between the representatives of erudition on either side of the Atlantic being a theme to be exploited later with great success by contemporary English University novelists — and, by this date, 1911, at the expense of women undergraduates. Thus, Beerbohm observes:

«Mainly architectural, the beauties of Oxford. True the place is no longer one-sexed. There are the virguncules of Somerville and Lady Margaret's Hall; but beauty and the lust for learning have yet to be allied» (9).

Zuleika herself is, of course, beautiful, but (like Agnes in Forster's novel), is spiritually mediocre, dishonest, and banal beyond endurance: «I know nothing really about music, but I do know what I like», she observes several times!

However, what is especially significant about *Zuleika Dobson* is that, under all this comic parody, there does lie a passionately nostalgic affection for the *genius loci* of Oxford, which Beerbohm expresses almost dramatically in Chapter XII, in

which, overcome by a «revival of memories», he offers, in a book seemingly dedicated to a debunking of the Oxford cult, a most moving tribute to the spirit of the place:

«... there is nothing in England to be matched with what lurks in the vapours of these meadows, and in the shadows of these spires — that mysterious, inenunerable spirit, spirit of Oxford. Oxford! The very sight of word printed, or sound of it spoken, is fraught for me with most actual magic» (10).

In 1913, Compton Mackenzie published what is still one of his most popular books, his two-volume novel, *Sinister Street*. The hero of the story, Michael Fane, like Forster's Rickie, acquires his most formative experiences at Oxford, and through, as Newman had insisted, his daily contact with his group of friends, who are of varying backgrounds, dispositions and talents. In each other's rooms, they discuss politics, ethics and literature, each one contributing to an atmosphere of intellectuality which, in its turn, reacts upon and stimulates each of them individually. Indeed, it becomes increasingly frequent in the Oxbridge novel to emphasize the different physical characteristics and intellectual attainments and aspirations of the hero's group: it is a theme which is exploited to good effect in the modern sequences about Oxbridge life, such as C. P. Snow's *Strangers and Brothers* sequence, and J. I. M. Stewart's pentalogy, *A Staircase in Surrey*, precisely because their very length permits these authors to trace the development of the members of the group in their after-University life.

As Rickie did in Cambridge, Michael Fane feels the vitality of Oxford's past as a force in the development of his own spirit, which will prepare him for a life of service to others. I am, he says:

«... so positive that the best of Oxford is the best of England, and that the best of England is the best of humanity that I long to apply to the world the same standards we tacitly respect — we undergraduates. I believe every problem of life can be solved by the transcendency of the spirit which has transcended us up here» (11).

Michael Fane believes that service to others entails the redemption of a «fallen woman» with whom he had once been in love, a quest which brings him only disillusionment —as in *The Longest Journey*, there is again this sense of the spiritual inferiority of many women and of their alienation from the ideals inculcated into Oxbridge youth — but it is a disillusionment which he bears also with Oxford-inspired fortitude.

Now the scenes in which the reader sees Rickie Elliot or Michael Fane and their friends discussing philosophical problems might well be considered as fictional counterparts of the biographical scenes so many times recorded in memoirs concerning the early days of the Bloomsbury Group, scenes in which we see intellectuals such as Lytton Strachey, Forster himself, Thoby Stephen, Leonard Woolf, Clive Bell, etc. gathered together in, for example, G. E. Moore's room at Cambridge, and talking about just such questions as the subjective or objective existence of things, or ethical

principles, with perfect freedom added to a perfect respect for truth. It is not surprising, therefore, that some echoes of Cambridge life and ideals should make themselves heard in a novel by Virginia Woolf as they do in her third book, *Jacob's Room*, published in 1922. We learn from her nephew and biographer, Quentin Bell (12), that after her brother Thoby's tragic early death, she made several attempts to persuade his Cambridge *confrères* to give her details of his intellectual life there. She felt, says Bell, «... an amused yet resentful curiosity about the privileged masculine society at Cambridge». The third chapter of *Jacob's Room*, an impressionistic book and her first real attempt to experiment with the novel form, is dedicated to Jacob Flanders' life at Cambridge in the year 1906. Quentin Bell's expression, «an amused yet resentful curiosity» seems particularly apt since the tone in this chapter seems to be more ironical than in the rest of the book; she makes, for example, Jacob's first undergraduate impressions antifeminist: the professor's wives «ugly as sin» who attend a service in King's College Chapel are, he feels, a distraction, and should no more be allowed into the place than dogs are in a church! Their socializing activities *vis-à-vis* their husband's students or colleagues, than which, he affirms «nothing can be more horrible», he qualifies as «bloody beastly»!

Her impressionistic sketches of Cambridge life depict not only the students, but also the staff. Her reluctant admiration for Cambridge values is nowhere so clearly revealed as in her satirical portraits of the celibate dons whom Jacob observes crossing the quadrangle after dinner. Viewed from outside, these men are full of the defects that humanity is a prey to: old Huxtable is tipsy and rather mean, Sopwith limps and talks too much, Cowan is a self-complacent *bon viveur*, and yet, says Virginia Woolf:

«If any light burns above Cambridge, it must be from three such rooms (as theirs); Greek burns here; science there; philosophy on the ground floor» (13).

In spite of her «resentment», she has to admit that old Huxtable's head contains more ideas «than all the other heads in an underground railway carriage put together», that those who listened to Sopwith's talk in their undergraduate days «would remember it, and deep in dullness, gaze back on it and come to refresh themselves again», and that when Cowan intones Latin, «it is as if language were wine upon his lips». Were Virgil himself to come back to earth «nowhere else would (he) hear the like» (14). That «nowhere else» is significant: Cambridge, she implies, bequeathes something unique to those fortunate enough to frequent its precincts. She mentions, for example, *en passant*, a provincial scholarship student who, in later life, tries to depreciate in memory old Sopwith's *soirées*: «it all seemed childish, absurd... No, not all. He would send his son there. He would save every penny to send his son there» (15). Virginia Woolf does here, surely, prove how potent is the spell cast by the Oxbridge myth even on those who do not feel at home there, and *Jacob's Room* does, similarly, reflect admirably the ambiguity of her own feelings towards Cambridge — a mixture of resentment at its masculine exclusiveness, so wittily satirized in *A Room of One's Own*, and of admiration and respect for what it stands for in terms of intellectual achievement.

*Jacob Flanders* is, of course, reminiscent, and, in fact, in the late twenties, other



Oxford novels begin to register, generally nostalgically, the changes taking place in post-car Oxford, with the arrival of older men, of ex-servicemen, of, too, an increasing number of scholarship holders, and a growing student population which makes it impossible for them all to live in Colleges, with a breaking-down, therefore, of the community-value aspect of the traditional Oxford education. Two novels, published in 1921, Gerard Hopkins' *A City in the Foreground*, and Beverley Nichols' *Patchwork*, both stress the disillusionment of their heroes with an Oxford so different now from that of *Sinister Street*. Students, they feel, (presumably the scholarship holders, in particular), see their degree as a key to a career, and are more interested in getting down their lecture-notes correctly than in philosophical speculation about the existence of objects!

Meanwhile, from the nineteen thirties onwards, Oxbridge themes and the Oxbridge background appear with increasing frequency in another *genre*: the detective novel. This was very often written by an Oxford or Cambridge don, and, in fact, it is in such novels that we first find University stories told *not* from the perspective of the student, but from that of the dons. The academic milieu lends itself particularly well to the detective novel, since the circumstantial grouping of suspects demanded by the *genre* is natural in such a context, and the gregarious, possibly claustrophobic collegiate life of the older Universities gives the author ample opportunity to present a wide range of intelligent and possibly eccentric characters, each of whom may have had the chance to commit the crime, generally murder, under investigation. It might also be maintained that an academic training is a particular asset for the would-be detective story writer, if we consider how close is the relationship between historical and literary research and detective investigation: most theses are concerned with the interpreting of, and conclusions to be drawn from, a number of given facts or documents, and this in reality is what the detective does — draw his own conclusions about the authorship of a crime by interpreting *his* source-materials, i.e. the evidence. Be that as it may, between 1933 and 1965, no fewer than thirty detective novels were published situated against an English University background — thirteen in Oxford, seven in Cambridge, and the others in various places such as Dublin, Edinburgh, London. Very frequently, the investigation is undertaken by a don or or a Professor, the victim is nearly always another don or a College porter or servant. Titles such as *Don among the Dead Men*, *Murder at Cambridge*, and *Murder by Mathematics* are characteristic. As early as 1933, at the beginning of the «Golden Age» of detective fiction, the then Provost of Worcester College, Oxford, using the pseudonym of John Cecil Masterman, published *An Oxford Tragedy*, a novel in which the victim, found shot in his rooms, is a harsh and unpopular Tutor (victims have to be either anodyne or unpleasant in order not to spoil the reader's enjoyment). The story is narrated by the Senior Tutor, and the mystery is solved by a Viennese Visiting Professor, a lawyer, whose hobby is the study of crime and detection. The novel is representative of the best works of this kind: since it is narrated by a don, many details are given concerning Oxford life, and many scenes are evoked which were to become familiar in the novels of C. P. Snow and J. I. M. Stewart: the Senior Fellows' after-dinner port and dessert rituals were to become as much a constant of the dons' Oxbridge novel, as the students' discussion group of the undergraduate story. Again, there is in such novels, much affectionate registering of the ceremonies of Oxford, as of the beauty of the city and its architecture.

Two years later, Dorothy Sayers, a Somerville graduate, introduced a new dimension into the University detective novel by setting her ninth novel, *Gaudy Night*, in a Women's College at Oxford. The book deals, not with murder, but with an outbreak of vandalism and menaces, during the Gaudy week-end (16). The criminals are unmasked by Harriet Vane, a detective-novel writer, and her fiancé, the aristocratic private-eye, Lord Peter Wimsey, who, in fact, is a reincarnation of the romantic Oxford superman, à la Duke of Dorset: tremendously intelligent, courageous and athletic, something of a dandy, and an *aficionado* of good wines and *incunabula*. Since Harriet Vane is supposed to have not been back to her College for a long time, Dorothy Sayers has plenty of legitimate opportunities to register aspects of academic life. Indeed, the novel is totally academic: the principal characters are all academics and there are multiple references to typical Oxford staff and student activities from climbing Magdalen Tower before sunrise on May Day to having sherry and biscuits in the Warden's room. The whole book is informed with a profound appreciation of scholarship and the intellectual life; each chapter has an erudite quotation as its heading, and, indeed, the book is prefaced by a quotation from Donne affirming that:

«The University is a Paradise, Rivers of Knowledge are there, Arts and Sciences flow from thence.»

Whatever the merits or the shortcomings of *Gaudy Night* (17), the book certainly offers a livelier picture of women's colleges than Virginia Woolf offered in *A room of One's Own*.

1935 saw the publication of the first University detective novel by an author who has since cultivated the academic milieu for numerous other novels, both detective and otherwise. This was *Death at the President's Lodging* (called *Seven Suspects* in America!) by J. I. M. Stewart, writing as Michael Innes. Stewart was educated at Oxford and was a Tutor there from 1948 with his retirement. As will be seen later, all Stewart's Oxford books are informed with a tremendous affection for, and admiration of, the intellectual atmosphere and physical environment of his *alma mater*.

It would be beyond the scope of this study to examine the other, in some cases very interesting, examples of University detective fiction published since 1935; suffice it to say that it is a *genre* which would seem to be destined to continue to flourish for some time yet. One of the most recent examples of the incorporation of academic *erudition* into a mystery story, is *Our Man in Camelot*, by Anthony Price (18) published in 1975, in which the English cottage of a missing U.S. air-ace is found to be full of bibliography on Arthurian themes, and, in particular, on the legendary Battle of Mount Badon, at which Arthur was said to have repelled the English: it is strange to see the names of Gildas, Nennius and Geoffrey of Monmouth on the pages of a yellow-backed mystery story, and to learn that the hero is finally murdered after being led astray by a false piece of Latin intercalated into «the Leningrad M.S.» of Bede! The book comes to an exciting finish at the site of Mount Badon, where, shortly before his death, the hero meditates that future historians:

«... wouldn't even know who had besieged who — whether there'd been Saxon horse-tail standards waving up there or the banner of Our Lady. Whether the Saxons had been trapped and starved into the open to be caught by one great scything charge of Arthur's fabled horsemen, or whether the Britons had been trapped and saved at last by an epic Arthurian ride-to-the-rescue.

They'd never know, and it didn't matter a damn because that was how it ought to be: a matter of faith, not fact. Because the enduring value of Arthur existed not in the elusive truth of his historical victory and defeat, but in the vision each generation had of him» (18).

As was mentioned before, Evelyn Waugh also incorporated the University theme into his novel, *Brideshead Revisited*, which, however, although published in 1945 is something of an anachronism, or rather, as he says, a novel of «reminiscence». «My theme», says Charles Ryder, the narrator, «is memory», and the Oxford that he describes is that of 1922-23. The novel is seen from the student perspective, since Ryder and his friend Sebastian Flyte, whose influence, and that of his family, on Ryder, is what the novel is about, are undergraduates. The Oxford part of the book is entitled, significantly, «Et in Arcadia Ego»: «... never afterwards», says Ryder, «except sometimes in my painting did I come alive as I had been during the time of my friendship with Sebastian», so it is not surprising that the evocation of Oxford should be so affectionately undertaken. It is an era when there was still a «fast set», rich, capricious, rowdy and often drunken students, and an era in which women are still felt to be alien and at least a nuisance, to be put up with only during Eights Week, and then despatched back to their homes with relief. The theme, however, *Brideshead Revisited*, like Forster and Mackenzie, is the influence of these formative undergraduate years on the student's future life. On his arrival at Oxford, Ryder ignores the advice given to him by his conventional older cousin, and falls in with «the undesirables», with the «fast set», with whom he gets involved in a number of more or less reprehensible escapades. Although Ryder and Sebastian do not engage in philosophical discussions, Waugh's thesis is nevertheless the same as Newman's: what Ryder receives from his Oxford years, from his contact with Sebastian and his family is more important than pure academic knowledge:

«At the end of the term I took my first schools; it was necessary to pass, if I was to remain at Oxford, and pass I did, after a week in which I forbade Sebastian my rooms and sat up to a late hour, with iced black coffee and charcoal biscuits, cramming myself with the neglected texts. I remember no syllable of them now, but the other, more ancient lore which I acquired that term will be with me in one shape or another to my last hour» (19).

*Brideshead Revisited* is, then, still very much a «cult of Oxford» book, and, in fact, in this, Waugh's most explicitly Catholic novel, Ryder's very salvation depends on these Oxford years, in which his emotional involvement with the Flyte family leads him to undergo a dramatic conversion to Catholicism on revisiting, during the Second World War, the chapel of Sebastian's ancestral home, Brideshead.

Now, in the same year, 1945, Philip Larkin irrevocably broke with this «cult of

Oxford» tradition with, in fact, an Oxford novel, *Jill*. This novel has been considered by one critic to contain «... the first example of that characteristic landmark of the British post-war novel, the displaced working-class hero» (20). The Oxford that Larkin knew as an undergraduate was wartime Oxford, an austerity Oxford, from which all the festivities had been eliminated, in which, as Larkin himself says, in his Preface, «... a lack of *douceur* was balanced by a lack of *bêtises*, whether of college ceremonial or undergraduate extravagance» (21). There he met and made friends with Kingsley Amis, and in his Introduction to *Jill* refers to Amis's comic exploits as imitator and jokester in a way which prepares the reader for Jim Dixon's activities in *Lucky Jim*.

Unlike *Brideshead Revisited*, *Jill* is not a novel of nostalgic reminiscence, but of 1940's realism, incorporating a number of innovations into the University story. The hero, John Kemp, is a Lancashire scholarship boy, with a working-class background, having more in common with the «poor scholar» of the nineteenth century reform novel than with any of his twentieth century predecessors, and the principal theme of the work, constitutes, as it were, a reversal of the Newman community-value theme, for it shows how collegiate community living can sometimes have a totally negative effect. For Kemp is lodged with Warner, an ex-minor public-school «fast set» type, who drinks too much, has women into his rooms, studies not at all, and in general exudes an air of the world air that Kemp desperately tries to emulate. In fact, Kemp's enforced proximity to Warner brings him nothing but pain and solitude: he spends too much and drinks too much under Warner's influence, and when he falls romantically in love with the Jill of the title, is alienated from her by the «good offices» of Warner's girlfriend. The novel ends with Kemp in the college sick-bay with pneumonia, after being ducked in a fountain by the Warner set, for attempting to kiss Jill. The moral of the story is that collegiate life has brought nothing but disaster to Kemp, at least in this his first year.

There is another hard-working scholarship student from Yorkshire who makes friendly overtures to Kemp, and with whom friendship would presumably be more profitable, but Larkin skilfully shows Whitbread, as he is called, to be totally lacking in the flamboyant appeal of Warner, which so impresses young Kemp. One is here, of course, back on the ground of the reform novel with its «fast set/studious set» dichotomy. Whitbread is portrayed in the following terms:

«He had a pale stubbly head, queerly like a dormouse, and thick stell-rimmed spectacles: he spoke with a flat Yorkshire accent that made John suppose wrongly that he had a sense of humour. John could tell by his clothes that he was not well-off, and he remembered a phrase from one of his mother's letters (it was still in his pocket) that said that she hoped he had made some friends «of his own standing». With a gust of indignation he realized that she meant people like Whitbread» (22).

Another new and obviously modern theme is introduced in the twenty odd pages which Larkin (in the form of a flash-back) dedicates to the process by which a working-class boy, like Kemp, ever gets to Oxford at all; that is, the interest taken in him by an English literature teacher who discerns some academic potential in Kemp, encourages him to study more, lends him books and persuades both headmaster

and parents to let him sit for an entrance to Oxford. The process is fully documented. The idea of an Oxford education being a privilege worth struggling for, is implicit in the tremendous amount of hard work that Kemp puts into his preparatory year, and, indeed, there is a contradiction between the effort he has had to make in order to get into Oxford, and the very little effort demanded of him once he is there. Kemp, as has been already mentioned, has been seen as a *displaced* working-class hero, and, in effect, on finishing the book, the reader certainly does get the impression that had he gone to a «red-brick», provincial University, with no room-mate ubiquitously present, and attending frequent and mixed lectures, he somehow would indeed have been more at ease, and certainly less lonely. *Jill* seems, therefore, to constitute an indictment of the «romanticized» treatment of Oxford undergraduate life as found in *Sinister Street* or, indeed, *Brideshead Revisited*.

1947 saw the publication of C. P. Snow's first Cambridge novel, within his novel sequence, *Strangers and Brothers*, a series of stories loosely connected by the presence in all of them of the narrator, Lewis Elliot. The specifically University novels in the sequence are: *The Masters*, *The New Men* and *The Affair*. The University detective novels excepted, these are the first University novels to be written from the perspective of the professorate, for Snow was a Fellow of Christ Church for twenty years. The backgrounds of the novels do incorporate a fair amount of familiar and traditional Oxbridge elements, but what is an innovation is Snow's preoccupation, writing as he is from the dons' perspective, with topics such as research, the organization and administration of the colleges, the clash of personalities within a given college, questions of staff promotion, University politics, etc., that is, topics which can be of vital importance to those involved. Though the action of the novels takes place in Cambridge, their themes are universal, for they offer in-depth studies of the effects of ambition and power-lust, of the clash of politics and personalities, of the carriage or miscarriage of justice. His finest work, in this respect, is, undoubtedly, *The Masters* (1951) which charts the ups and downs and ins and outs, of the election of a new Master for a Cambridge college. The rival candidates are two widely differentiated men: the one, shrewd and reliable, but rather inhuman, the other, warm and sympathetic, but given to extravagance. *The Masters* has been accused of parochialism, but Snow does very skilfully present the marked divergences of age, character and aspirations within the college unit, and the ensuing clashes between the supporters of the rival candidates is depicted in an exciting way which makes the book difficult to put down. It is, in fact, a book which virtually excludes the traditional subject of the University novel — the student — but does still implicitly pay tribute to the *genius loci* to the Cambridge spirit, since the very passion and intensity with which these highly intelligent and often very sensitive men live through the election is a token of their esteem for the position being fought over: it is precisely because the college means so much to them that their choice of a Master is so important. The end of the novel reveals the triumph of the University spirit over personal disappointment, as the defeated candidate, Jago, drinks a toast to his rival's victory, at the newly-elected Master's celebratory dinner!

Tis University spirit, implying both loyalty and a disinterested quest for truth, likewise triumphs in *The Affair* (1960), in which a rather disagreeable young scientist is unjustly accused of faking an experiment, deprived of his fellowship, but finally reinstated. As with Jago's rival in *The Masters*, one can feel little sympathy with

this character, but the point being made is that within the University context, truth must be more important than personalities!

Snow's novels, then, are imbued with great earnestness and a profound respect for the University as an institution, but, by the 1950's, a new wave of debunking, of «demythification», of that humorous and satirical treatment of University themes, which is still in full spate, was launched, not, as is generally believed, by Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* but by an underservedly overlooked novel by William Cooper, called *The Struggles of Albert Woods*, published in 1952. This novel deals with a number of topics to be exploited in *Lucky Jim*, but the University scene is observed, not by a hostile jokester, as Jim Dixon is, but by its lower-middle class hero who is «a little Napoleon», and whose greatest ambition is to be completely assimilated into the highest *échelons* of the University establishment. An Experimental Chemist, Albert aspires, between the years 1923 to 1945, to becoming a Professor, an F.R.S., a Knight, and, perhaps, a Nobel Prize winner. He does, in fact, become a number of things, for the story is a success-story, albeit told in the ironic mode, and exposing at the same time the often disreputable mechanics of success: a sort of academic *Room at the Top!*

Although situated in Oxford, there is little or no mention of the city's «dreaming spires», and the story deals exclusively with Albert's post-graduate life, first as an Assistant, later as Fellow, and, finally, as Professor, of Experimental Chemistry. Among the new topics introduced into Cooper's novel is that of the rat-race relationship between science research-students and their supervisors, and between each other. Cooper also deals with acerbity with questions concerning the academic hierarchy and the self-interest that may accompany the apparently objective promotion of learning:

«... most readers at some time or other conceive of their readership being transformed into a professorship — not, as they will invariably hasten to say, because they want status for themselves, but because they want status for their subject» (23).

The «cliqueyness» of Oxford is likewise observed satirically: Albert has difficulty in getting elected to a Fellowship, although he is the only candidate, because he had not been an undergraduate at Oxford, and this in spite of the fact that Albert, by this stage of the novel, has improved his «flat, midland accent», and now has:

«... a most glentlemanly (one) in the Edwardian-Oxford style: though he occasionally let slip “bath” with a short “a”, he never failed to say, for example, “lawst” for “lost”» (24).

Cooper introduces other topics which may be considered as innovations: for example, an extraordinarily suggestive and totally unironical evocation of the excitement of scientific research, which is Albert's principal activity:

«Usually the beginning of a piece of research is when something strikes a spark on one's imagination: something one does not know seems a particularly fascinating thing to try and find out. Partly the thing itself seems

important and fascinating in its own right, partly one has intimations that one can find it out. That is where the spark comes in — the intimation that one can actually find it out gives one a particular thrill that is irresistible. There is a flash, and as with love one knows that one is in it.

Now whether or not it is possible to put into words what one feels at the start, when the spark catches, when the thrill traps one completely, there is nowhere near as much difficulty about putting into words what happens next» (25).

When research is successful, one remains, adds Cooper, «spellbound and triumphant». Again, since Albert is a scientist, not a humanist, he introduces a theme which C. P. Snow was to explore in depth two years later in *The New Men*, (which deals with nuclear fission), that is to say, the ethical connotations of the exploiting of scientific research for destructive purposes: in 1939, Albert discovers a formula for producing large quantities of lethal nerve gas whose destructive effects, in case of war, would be incalculable. Eventually, the gas is, in fact, not used in the Second World War, yet Cooper does write one very telling passage on the subject:

«It was ironical that Dibdin and Albert, both, whatever their failings, among the most humane of men, should have been called into affairs to take part in the production of explosives and poison-gases. Though they may have been deplorably ready to do anyone out of his job, the last thing they wanted was to do anyone out of his life.

Yet there they sat at meetings, their eyes alight with interest and their hearts curiously untouched. To anyone outside it may look strange, but in life it is quite common. Many human activities, when looked at from outside, are scarcely laudable: if they have got to be done it is perhaps a saving grace in human nature that men have an instinct to professionalize and domesticate them. That is what Dibdin, Albert, and the other members of the committee — all decent men, after their fashion — did» (26).

In an amusing article published in *Punch* in 1959, Malcolm Bradbury describes how, as a graduate student, writing a novel about provincial University life, he was told that nobody wanted to read about provincial Universities! However, he says:

«... a few days after this, the world had changed for people like me. Mr. Amis had published *Lucky Jim*... I was in the right stream after all» (27).

*Lucky Jim*, published in 1954, and dedicated to Philip Larkin, was the first University, or rather, anti-University, novel to become a best-seller, running into ten impressions in the year of publication, and later becoming a successful film. The «hero», Jim Dixon, who has, like Albert Woods, «a flat, Northern voice» is a Junior Lecturer in Mediaeval History at a red-brick University. The villains of the piece are his Professor and the Professor's wife and a tenacious woman colleague who is exploiting his fundamental good-nature in order to force him into a «relationship» with her. The novel is viewed from the staff perspective, although the student-staff relation-

ship is also touched on. Jim has many faults: he drinks, plays practical jokes, mimics people, and has drifted into a job without any real conviction, but, in contrast to many of those around him, he is, at least, honest about and with himself, and he is totally free of the vanity and the pomposity which, unfortunately, the professorate is so given to! Jim is constantly on his guard against self-deception:

«How wrong people always were when they said: “It’s better to know the worst than go on not knowing either way”. No, they had it exactly the wrong way round. Tell me the truth, Doctor, I’d sooner know. But only if the truth is what I want to hear» (28).

The novel has something in common with the happy-ending picaresque novel of the *Tom Jones* type, since Jim, after being dismissed from the University after delivering a disastrous public lecture, whilst drunk, is employed as secretary to a shrewd old millionaire. Although a good deal of the novel is dedicated to analysing Jim’s relationship with his boss and the two women in his life — that is, topics which a novelist can explore within varying contexts — the book contains a number of specific University themes, whose satirical aspects, perhaps, may only be fully appreciated by readers with personal experience of University life. Professor Welch, for example, is the very epitome of academic pomposity and pedantry:

«No other professor in Great Britain, thought Jim, set such store by being called Professor» (29).

He plays the recorder, organizes «arty» musical week-ends and makes Jim constantly aware of the precariousness of his professional situation, by reiteratedly urging him to publish a learned article, or to give a public lecture. It is not easy for Jim to do either of these things, since, as he says with his habitual honesty:

«... the reason I’m a mediaevalist, as you call it, is that the mediaeval papers were a soft option in the Leicester course, so I specialized in *them*» (30).

Amis’s satire at the expense of academic endeavour is superb: Jim’s one and only scholarly article is entitled *The Economic Influence of the Development in Ship-Building Techniques, 1450-1485*. It was, Jim thinks:

«... a perfect title, in that it crystallized the article’s niggling mindlessness, its funeral parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw on non-problems... In considering this strangely neglected topic, it began. This what neglected topic? This strangely what topic? This strangely neglected what?» (31).

Jim’s preparation of his public lecture is presented in the same satirical light:

«Early the previous evening he’d tried working his notes for it up into a script. The first page of notes had yielded a page and three lines of script.



At that rate he'd be able to talk for eleven and a half minutes as his notes now stood. Some sort of pabulum for a further forty-eight and a half was evidently required, with perhaps a minute off for being introduced to the audience, another minute for water-drinking, coughing and page-turning and nothing at all for applause and curtain calls» (32).

When Jim is dismissed, he consoles himself by thinking that there were:

«... compensations for ceasing to be a lecturer, especially that of ceasing to lecture» (33).

Another academic *leitmotiv* running through the novel is the «special course» which Jim must give and about which a keen student, forerunner of Malcolm Bradbury's «keen student» is perpetually harrasing him. Apart from having no desire at all to give this course, Jim is haunted by the fear that more students may register for it than for Professor Welch's, thus alienating him even more from his means of survival! There are too, as in *Jill*, allusions to specific contemporary problems: thus, a colleague of Jim's comments on the University entrance system, and the need to pass mediocre students because there is a shortage of teachers, as, indeed, there was, in Great Britain in the 1950's. There is no doubt, therefore, that in *Lucky Jim*, Amis satirically exploded a number of academic myths.

In 1956, another major English novelist, Angus Wilson, published a novel, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, which, although not situated within a University context, is peopled by a number of active or retired academic characters, and, like Snow in *The Affair*, deals with the theme of academic integrity and the quest for truth. The possibility of a famous archaeological find being, in fact, a hoax, haunts the protagonist, Gerald Middleton, a retired Oxford mediaeval historian, until the end of the book when he finally manages to settle the question at least to his own satisfaction.

From the 1950's onwards too, the cult of Oxford has continued, to a certain extent, to be represented in the novels of J. I. M. Stewart, some of which, like *The Guardians*, are specifically academic novels, others being only partially so: *Vanderlyn's Kingdom*, for example, (1967), has several chapters dedicated to the visit made to Oxford by an American millionaire, bent, possibly, on offering an endowment: affectionate decriptions of the beauties of Oxford architecture abound, and in a moonlit quadrangle, Vanderlyn first meets a young man, his relationship with whom, will constitute the central theme of the novel. *The Guardians*, 1955, a rather Jamesian exercise, reminiscent of *The Aspern Papers*, deals with the acquisiton by the University of literary documents for later research, and entertainingly explores the varieties of academic temperament, both English and American, and the strategies by which the documents are eventually kept in Oxford. In *Mungo's Dream*, 1973, Stewart revived the Oxford undergraduate community-value novel, adding a certain contemporary flavour by including references to demos and student sit-ins.

In view of the obvious delight he takes in the city and the University which have been his home for over thirty years, it is not surprising that Stewart should have eventually created for Oxford something similar to the chronicle of Cambridge drawn up by Snow. In 1974, Stewart published the first volume of what was to be a quintet of novels under the general title of *A Staircase in Surrey* (34), called *The Gaudy*: in

this book. Stewart uses the annual old-members dinner at Surrey College as a point of departure for the story, told often in flash-backs by the first-person narrator, Duncan Pattullo, of his own life from student days onwards, as also that of his *confederate* who «went up» to Oxford at the same time as he did. The real protagonist is the University itself which bequeathes to its students a series of values and ideals, which will influence their mature lives — the *alma mater* to which they will frequently return: the narrator to become a Fellow, his erstwhile companions to attend Gaudies, conferences or to sort out the problems of their own undergraduate offspring.

The second volume, *Young Pattullo* (1975), is a novel of reminiscence, full of the traditional themes of the cult of Oxford novel: philosophical discussions at tea-time, pontifering on the Isis, etc. but also incorporating psychologically convincing explorations of themes related to calf-love and sexual attraction, as well as some well-defined studies of Tutor-Undergraduate relationships. *A Memorial Service* (1976), by contrast, we are given a dons' perspective of Oxford, since Pattullo is now a Fellow of Surrey, and the narration is brought up more or less to the present day. This novel, therefore, introduces a number of new themes: as a don, Pattullo becomes acquainted with the economic and administrative problems of the college, and, indeed, some of the central episodes in the book stem from the Provost's determination to obtain a benefaction from an ex-Surrey millionaire, who, unfortunately, has an outrageous grandson, a modern version of «the fast set» undergraduate, who has to be finally sent down. Student behaviour, in general, does, in fact, play an important part in this novel. Indeed, Stewart, in this novel sequence, would appear to be the first novelist to bring into action simultaneously all the different levels of University life. An optimistic version of Larkin's John Kemp, an intelligent, irreverent provincial lad, is introduced, for example, who is determined *not* to be overawed by the mystique of Oxford, and is clearly contrasted with another, overconscientious boy of the Kemp type, who, after falling victim to «the fast set», gets drunk, and knowing he will fail an all important examination, commits suicide. In the third volume, the University makes amends, as it were, for this tragedy, by having Pattullo take a personal interest in the boy's brother, who likewise manages to get to Oxford. The fourth volume, *The Madonna of the Astrolabe*, 1977, the title of an Italian picture discovered in the College which will give it a new economic lease on life, deals with money with Pattullo's relationship with a woman-colleague, and continues the exploration of student activities in the seventies. The final volume in the sequence, *Full Term*, 1978, whilst tying up a series of loose ends concerning Oattullo's emotional life, and clearing up some ancient family history, introduces as its principal theme a strikingly contemporary one: that of the suspected defection to Moscow of one of the Fellows of Surrey, a brilliant nuclear physicist. The mystery of his extraordinary behaviour is eventually solved in a satisfyingly Michael Innes' fashion, and Stewart seizes the opportunity too to make gentle fun of the tradition within which he himself is writing. When asked about how to write a novel, a Tutor, pedantic, but not wholly devoid of humour, observes: «I advised him... to essay the now well-established genre of salacious campus fiction» (35).

In other words, in this sequence, a number of themes which hitherto had only been touched on isolatedly, are here welded together to offer an intricate but recognizable and credible whole: University administration, the lives, wives and loves of a variegated set of dons, the relationships between the staff, male and female, and

the students, the mechanics of University entrance, collegiate community life, and so on.

Perhaps one of the most interesting of contemporary University novelists is Malcolm Bradbury, Professor of English and American Studies at the University of East Anglia, who, as was mentioned, was writing his novel about provincial University life *Eating People is Wrong*, (1959), when Amis published *Lucky Jim*. Unlike Amis, however, who deliberately sets out to make a farse out of the academic profession, by using as his reflecting intelligence a hostile viewer, who attributes his discomfort in the University context to the pedantry of his Professor, Bradbury, himself a red-brick graduate from Leicester, aimed at writing a realistic, «serious fifties» account of life at a provincial University as seen through the eyes of a liberal, self-questioning Professor of English Literature, Stuart Treece, who almost falls over backwards in his attempts to be fair in his judgements, and precisely because of this spirit of fair-mindedness, often mismanages people and bumbles situations in a very comical way. The book is original, surely, in the history of the University novel, for being the only such written by a student from a staff perspective. Bradbury's becoming himself a Professor, he explained in a lecture (36), is a typical «life follows art» situation!

*Eating People is Wrong* combines in a new and interesting way aspects familiar in previous University novels, and new ones: in spite of its humorous scenes, we are presented with the first serious attempt to deal realistically with life at a red-brick University, and although the story is told from a professorial standpoint, it is greatly concerned with the staff-student relationship (even in red-bricks there are tutorial sessions!) and with that of the staff with one another. Women, both as academics and students, are seen for the first time as intellectual equals (women, indeed, come off better in Bradbury's novels than do the men), and love affairs with them are treated as the natural corollary of both sexes being thrown together professionally; again, the rather prosaic day-to-day activities which take up the greater part of the lecturers' lives are chronicled in convincing and recognizable detail: staff-meetings, visiting lecturers, and — characteristic of life in a red-brick University with no collegiate system within which to establish social relations — the celebration of what generally turn out to be uncomfortable tea-parties, where people tend to talk at cross — purposes, the students being shy with the staff, the staff being both embarrassing and embarrassed in their efforts to be natural. Bradbury's humour and his superb ear for dialogue are at their most effective in such scenes:

«This is one of the occasions when one could do with being married», said Treece with a bright smile to one of the girls, the enthusiastic Miss Winterbottom. «Can I help?» asked Miss Winterbottom. The man with the beard burst into fresh laughter. «I mean, like getting something from the kitchen», went on Miss Winterbottom, blushing to a full shade of red. «next time you must let me lend you my wife», said Carfaz, amiably. All were amused, on the politest level. «Like the Eskimos do», muttered the man with the beard. «What's that?» asked Treece pleasantly; there were no secrets here. A girl in glasses with immense, brightly coloured rims kicked the man's ankle to indicate that his remark lacked taste. This spurred him to further efforts and he embarked on a premeditated routine.

«Is it true, Professor Treece, that you're interested in hand-bell ringing?»

he asked with an assumed nonchalance that reminded the girl in glasses how sweet she found him.

«It was an interest of mine, Hopgood; you're perfectly right», said Treece, going a little red. «But there are richer pastimes». This was what Hopgood thought a typical «Treece» remark and he smiled inside his beard and looked about him for approbation.

«Aren't bus-fares terribly expensive?» asked the girl in spectacles, smiling maternally at Treece.

«Transport», said Treece, seizing this kindly opening, «must be something of an item to those people who live in lodgings a long way out». Due consideration was given to this proposition; assent followed» (37).

Such parties are even more excruciating when the English staff and students are trying to be polite and welcoming to foreign or Commonwealth students:

«The reception was being held in a large, dirty room with a splintery plank floor, decorated for the occasion with a large circle of wooden chairs and a large metal tea-urn from which Dr. Viola Masefield, likewise coopted for the occasion, was dispensing tea to a variety of nervous students of all nationalities and colorus. Treece was there, trying to get everyone to sit down; no one would. «Vot», demanded an extremely stout German student, greeting Emma with a bow as she entered, “is your vanderland?” “I'm English”, said Emma. “Oho”, said the German with great cheerfulness. «Then it is your task to entertain me. I am ready.”

“I'll bet you are?” said Emma. She went over to Dr. Masefield at the tea-urn: “Is there anything I can be doing?” she asked. “Just mingle, I think, if you would”, said Dr. Masefield jovially, looking up.

.....

at that moment a sudden commotion occurred in a far corner of the room; a Negro student, in an excess of nerves, had spilled a cup of tea over a reader in economics. “My word! Eborebelosa!” Treece said; and he hurried off.

“I must go and talk to somebody else?” said Emma, and went over to a group of Indian students gathered in a corner. As soon as she announced her name, a sharp silence fell over the group. Their former animation turned to a comatose contemplation of each other's shoes. “You are a tall woman”, said someone politely.

“Midwinter spring is its own season”, said one of them, a nun, suddenly. “You know this quotation, of course, and how pertinent are those words, for now, as you see, the sun is shining.” She pointed to the window.

“It is of T. S. Eliot”, said a voice at Emma's side; it was the German, who had followed her over. “Lean, lean, on a garden urn...” You know this too?”

Suddenly all the Indians began quoting Eliot. “A hard coming we had of it”, cried one. “There were no tigers”, intoned another contrapuntally.

“In India”, said the nun; all the others fell silent, “the work of Mr. Eliot is very much respected; he is translated; and many people have written his

thesis for his doctorate on inclinations of his work". "In Germany too", said Mr. Schumann» (38).

As in Snow's novels, the University spirit is seen to triumph eventually, over human failings and errors, thus justifying the existence of the institution; for the central theme of *Eating People is Wrong* is, surely, Stuart Treece's liberalism, his honesty, his desire to be so scrupulously fair that he feels he must conquer his very natural antipathy towards his obnoxious student, Louis Bates, and, indeed, goes so far in this direction that, in a spirit of selfpunishment, as it were, he even tries to encourage an affair between Bates and Emma Fielding, with whom he is half in love himself. Of course, Bradbury, like Snow, is, in fact, using the context he knows best to analyse, portray, as he himself has said, «... a certain kind of liberal character in a world where I felt it was getting harder and harder to uphold the traditional E.M. Forster-like values of liberalism» (39), and the ensuing result when this liberal temperament comes into contact with more worldly characters, with the natural «eaters», in a word!

This is even more true of Bradbury's second novel, *Stepping Westward*, (1965), which supposes an innovation in the implicit comparison, through the eyes of James Walker, an English writer invited as a «creative artist» to the English Department of a Middle-Western American university, between the English and the American university scene. *Stepping Westward* is just as much a book about University politics and power-lust as *The Masters*, since, in fact, from his very arrival, the fat, lethargic Walker becomes a pawn (that is, one of the «eaten») in the hands of the dynamic and self-seeking American professor, Bernard Froelich. However, in *Stepping Westward*, University issues acquire a political and national projection: for the climax of the book concerns Walker's refusal, at Froelich's suggestion, to sign the oath of allegiance to the American government; this then hits the headlines, and the concrete result, when all the hullabaloo dies down, is that the Head of the Department loses his post; Froelich can then replace him, which, in fact, has been his aim throughout the novel. The book, then, like *The Masters*, is about ambition, but whereas Snow makes us feel that the mastership is worth struggling for, here one is left, like Walker, with a desire only to take the first plane out of Party! As in *Eating People is Wrong*, Bradbury very amusingly surrounds his central theme with a series of supporting American university topics as seen by an Englishman: academic and socializing activities are satirically portrayed, and the staff-student relationship touched on with humour.

Froelich, Bradbury explained in his lecture (40), constitutes the first version of the central character, Howard Kirk, of his third and last University novel so far, *The History Man* (1975), which marks a complete break with the goodhumoured, tolerant, «liberal» atmosphere of the two earlier works. Bradbury, in his lecture (41), affirmed that he felt he could no longer, in a world which he found less and less joyful, create a friendly text, inhabited by characters it is easy to like, or at least, to tolerate, and that he wanted to adapt his technique to his new, less benevolent, attitude. *The History Man* is, therefore, written in the ironic mode, and, *ironically*, considering the title, in the present tense. The novel concerns itself with the life and activities, and with the devastating consequences of these for others, of Professor Howard Kirk, a radical sociologist at a «new» University — «a small, bright, intense, active man», who writes prolifically and appears frequently on television. His

University is «an expanding dream in white concrete, glass and architectural free-form» designed by Kaakinen, an *avant-garde* Finnish architect, and here Kirk gives his famous lecture-course on Revolutions, for «the university, having aspirations to relevance, has made much of sociology». An ambitious «eater», Howard is madly «trendy», sexually promiscuous, placatory with those above him, and bullying with those below. Among the victims of his egotism are his wife, apparently as «trendy» and modern as he, but who on the final page commits, or tries to commit suicide (we do not know which), and a student called Carmody, whom Howard takes an unfair dislike to. Whereas Treece, is willing in his altruism to sacrifice his own interests in order to foster those of the obnoxious Bates, Howard unjustly fails this student in reality for not being sufficiently «trendy». Evil breeds evil, for Carmody seeks to take his revenge in just as vile a way, by blackmail, although he is finally overwhelmed by Kirk's bullying self-confidence: Carmody's sole defender, an intelligent woman-lecturer, becomes Kirk's mistress, and is thus also lost to Carmody's cause. In short, this novel, is primarily an exploration of the effects on society when an «eater» is not only let loose in society, but also encouraged and supported by society, and, secondarily, a University novel, since the University serves as an arena for Howard Kirk's activities. Indeed, although Kirk could be imagined in other *milieux*, the world of big business, or industry, one discerns that Bradbury is here underlining the special sympathy existing not only between the pushing, «trendy», self-satisfied character of Kirk and that of the supermarket, high-rise flats and multiple-level car-parks type of town he lives in, but also between him and the new University itself. Originally housed in an Elizabethan mansion, it becomes a «campus» with ultra-modern buildings:

«... the campus is massive, one of those dominant environments of multifunctionality that modern man creates: close it down as a University, a prospect that seemed to become increasingly possible, as the students came to hate the world and the world the University, and you could open it again as a factory, a prison, a shopping precinct» (42).

It does, indeed, all seem a far cry from the «dreaming spires» of *Sinister Street* or *The Longest Journey*!

Finally, the same year as *The History Man*, another academic, novelist and critic, David Lodge, published his novel, *Changing Places, or, A Tale of Two Campuses*: whereas *Stepping Westward* showed us an American University as seen by an Englishman, *Changing Places*, again written in the ironic mode, has both an English and an American University, as seen, respectively by an American and an English Professor of Literature, who exchange jobs for six months, and end up, finally, not only with each other's rooms and students, but also with each other's wives! It is a promising plot a satirical exploration of the contrasting characteristics of the University institutions on either side of the Atlantic. Technically the book is interesting too: it is divided into six parts: *Flying*; *Settling*; *Corresponding*; *Reading*; *Changing*; *Ending*; the two academics are first conceived of as passing each other in mid-air, each in his respective jet: by means of a flashback we learn something of their characters and their personal pasts; *Settling* shows us their adaptation to their new environment; *Corresponding* presents us with letters from and about the characters; *Reading*

contains extracts from newspapers and pamphlets about the goings-on in both Universities, and *Eding* is presented in the form of a script for a television play, in which both Professors with each other's wives end up in an American hotel: and «the camera stops freezing (them) in mid-gesture».

The novel, apart from being very amusing, uncovers a number of important truths: for example, that people's behaviour is determined by their surroundings and the people they live with — that is what the *Changing* part is about: Morris Zapp, the American, and Philip Swallow, the Englishman, change to the extent of finding each other's very dissimilar wives attractive, and nothing is more significant of a change in a man than his taste in women! In fact, these two men, so highly differentiated in the first chapter — Zapp is a Howard Kirk type, Swallow a Stuart Treece type — tend to merge into each other at the end. Within this framework, too, Lodge does manage to include a large number of specifically 1970's University themes: seen, principally, from the staff point of view, although students do play an important collective part in the novel, as examinees, tutorial-attenders, drug-takers, manifesters and sitters-in for various causes.

The physical presence of the two institutions is brilliantly evoked: shabby, industrial red-brick English Rummidge, and spectacular Euphoria State, with its superb library facilities, efficient but depersonalized offices, and dreadful instant coffee tasting like disinfectant served in cardboard cups. Rummidge, however, has well-worn, but cosy rooms for its professors, and delicious tea is served in real china cups by two nice old ladies! That fundamental activity of all Universities — research — comes under fire in Lodge's novel: the two tendencies are, again, amusingly contrasted: Zapp is a super-specialist in Jane Austen:

«Some years ago he had embarked with great enthusiasm on an ambitious critical project: a series of commentaries on Jane Austen which would work through the whole canon, one novel at a time, saying absolutely everything that could be said about them. The idea was to be utterly exhaustive, to examine the novels from every conceivable angle, historical, biographical, rhetorical, mythical, Freudian, Jungian, existentialist, Marxist, structuralist, Christian-allegorical, ethical, exponential, linguistic, phenomenological, archetypal, you name it; so that when each commentary was written there would be simply *nothing futher to say* about the novel in question. The object of the exercise, as he had often to explain with as much patience as he could muster, was not to enhance others' enjoyment and understanding of Jane Austen, still less to honour the novelist herself, but to put a definitive stop to the production of any more garbage on the subject. The commentaries would not be designed for the general reader but for the specialist, who, looking up Zapp, would find that the book, article or thesis he had been planning had already been anticipated and, more likely than not, invalidated. After Zapp, the rest would be silence» (43).

whereas Philip Swallow is an all round man:

«Philip Swallow was a man with a genuine love of literature in all its diverse forms. He was as happy with Beowulf as with Virginia Woolf,

with *Waiting for Godot* as with *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, and in odd moments when nobler examples of the written word were not to hand he read attentively the backs of cornflakes packets, the small print on railway tickets and the advertising matter in books of stamps. This indiscriminating enthusiasm, however, prevented him from settling on a «field» to cultivate as his own. He had done his initial research on Jane Austen, but since then had turned his attention to topics as various as medieval sermons, Elizabethan sonnet sequences, Restoration heroic tragedy, eighteenth-century broadsides, the novels of William Godwin, the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and premonitions of the Theatre of the Absurd in the plays of George Bernard Shaw. None of these projects had been completed. Seldom, indeed, had he drawn up a preliminary bibliography before his attention was distracted by some new or revived interest in something entirely different. He ran hither and thither between the shelves of Eng. Lit. like a child in a toyshop — so reluctant to choose one item to the exclusion of others that he ended up empty-handed» (44).

These then have been the different stages in the trajectory followed by the University novel over the last seventy-five years: a trajectory during which it has ceased to be a novel exclusively occupied with depicting student-life at Oxford and Cambridge, to become a novel in which, gradually, the University, whether it be Oxbridge, red-brick, white-tile or «New», is seen to be an arena not only for the developing cultural horizons of youth, but also for the scholarly pursuits, passions, foibles, inter-relationships and political activities of mature or, indeed, elderly, academics, of both sexes, and to become, too, a novel in which, increasingly, not only the function of the University in society is being explored, but also, the University itself is being revealed as, indeed, a reflection of that society itself.

## NOTES

(1) C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, the 1959 Cambridge Rede Lecture, published in *Encounter*, June 1959, pp. 17-18.

(2) A term used by Mortimer R. Procter in his interesting study, *The English University Novel*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1957.

(3) Quoted in Procter, *ibid.*, p. 194.

(4) Quoted by Procter, *ibid.*, p. 195.

(5) E. M. Forster, *The Longest Journey*, Penguin Books, London, 1975, pp. 86-87.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 180.

(7) *op. cit.*, p. 197.

(8) Max Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson, or an Oxford Love Story*, Heinemann, London, 1947, pp. 12-13.

(9) *Op. cit.*, p. 68.

(10) *Op. cit.*, p. 137.

(11) Compton Mackenzie: *Sinister Street*, Macdonald, London, 1953, p. 558.

(12) Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf, a Biography*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1973, p. 112.

(13) Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, Penguin Books, London, 1965, pp. 36-37.

(14) *op. cit.*, p. 37.

(15) *Op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.

(16) «Gaudy» is the Oxbridge name for the annual dinner given by a College for its old members.

(17) Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, The New English Library, Times Mirror.

(18) Anthony Price, *Our Man in Camelot*, Gollancz, 1975, p. 218.



- (19) Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*. 1945; revised edition 1960, 1964, 1972. Chapman and Hall. London. p. 55.
- (20) James Gordin as quoted by Philip Larkin in his introduction to the 1975 edition of *Jill*. published by Faber, London, p. 11.
- (21) *Op. cit.*, p. 12.
- (22) *Op. cit.*, p. 51.
- (23) William Cooper. *The Struggles of Albert Woods*. Joanthan Cape. London. 1952, p. 29.
- (24) *Op. cit.*
- (25) *Op. cit.*, p. 233.
- (26) *Op. cit.*, p. 189.
- (27) Malcolm Bradbury, «The Man with the Grey Flannel Head», in *Punch*. November 11th., 1959.
- (28) Kingsley Amis: *Lucky Jim*. A Four Square Book. Landsborough Publications Ltd.. London, 1959; (originally published by Gollancz) p. 76.
- (29) *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- (30) *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.
- (31) *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- (32) *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- (33) *Op. cit.*, p. 206.
- (39) J. I. M. Stewart. *A Staircase in Surrey*. Gollancz, London, 1974-1978. The respective titles are: *The Gaudy*. 1974; *Young Pattullo*. 1975; *A Memorial Service*, 1976; *The Madonna of the Astrolabe*. 1977; *Full Term*, 1978.
- (35) J. I. M. Stewart. *Full Term*. Gollancz, London, 1978, p. 106.
- (36) Bradbury's lecture «The Writer's View of Fiction», was given in the Arts Faculty of the University of Oviedo. February 20th., 1978.
- (37) Malcolm Bradbury, *Eating People is Wrong*. Secker and Warburg, 1959. reissued with a new Introduction by the author. 1976. p. 80.
- (38) *Op. cit.*, pp. 35-36.
- (39) In his lecture on «The Writer's View of Fiction», mentioned previously.
- (40) In his lecture on «The Writer's View of Fiction» mentioned previously.
- (41) *Ibid.*
- (42) Malcolm Bradbury, *The History Man*. Secker and Warburg, London, 1975. p. 65. For a more extended analysis of the University novels by Malcolm Bradbury. see: María Socorro Suárez: *Malcolm Bradbury: Critico y Novelista*, Unpublished Doctorate Thesis. University of Oviedo, 1978.
- (43) David Lodge: *Changing Places: a Tale of Two Campuses*. Secker and Warburg. London. 1975. p. 35.
- (44) *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

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