

THE VERSE-NOVEL: A DESCRIPTION OF THE FORM,
WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION TO SELECTED
VERSE NARRATIVES OF THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

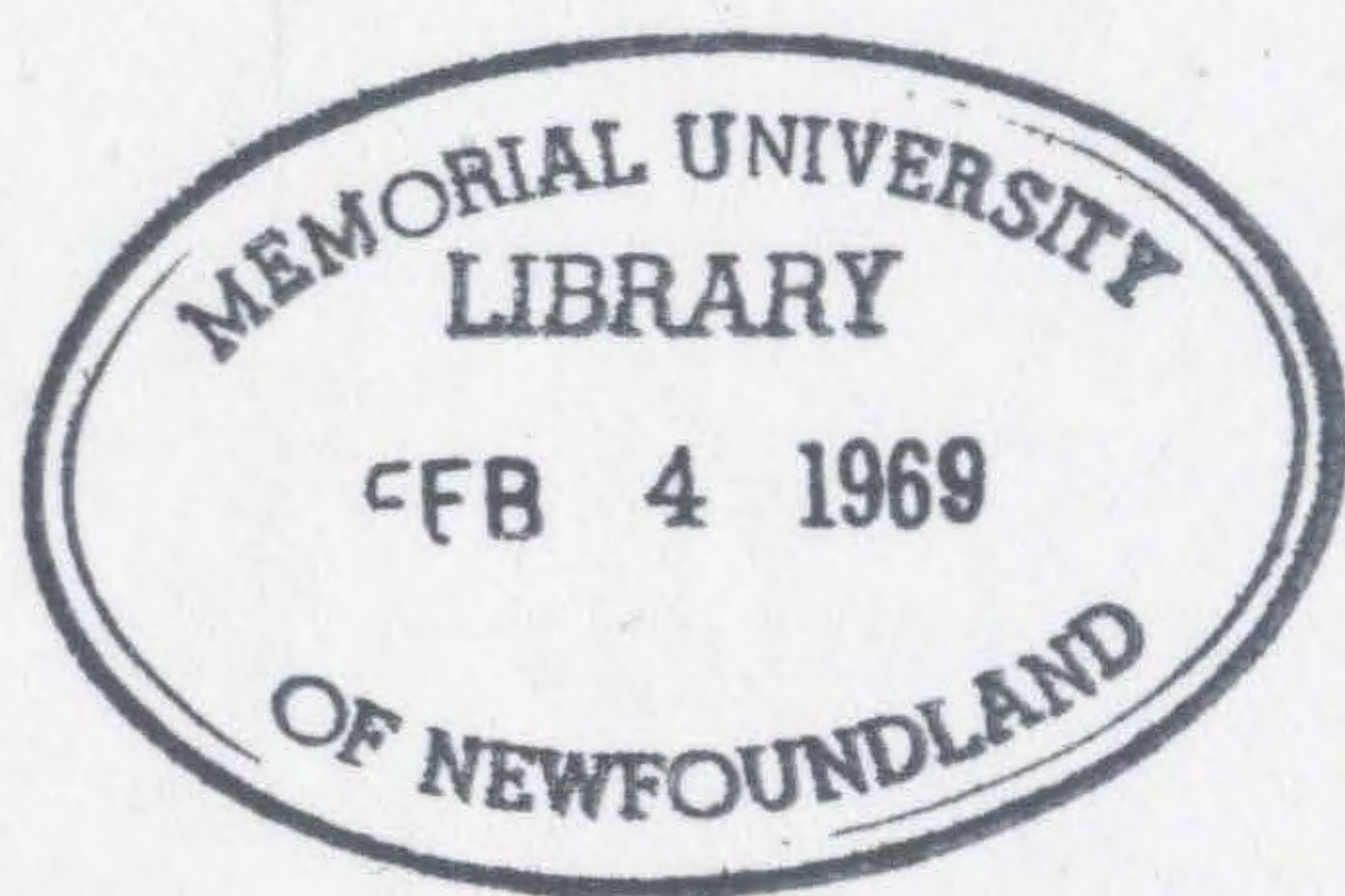
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ABSTRACT

Since 1900 the term "verse-novel" has frequently appeared in discussions of certain long narrative poems of the Victorian Period. The critics and literary historians who use the term, however, have applied it very loosely. Several critics, for example, have referred to Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book as a verse-novel, while a number of others have called it a form of epic. Again, while Mrs. Browning herself spoke of her Aurora Leigh as a novel-poem (i.e. a verse-novel), one critic refers to it as a metrical romance. There seems to be no general agreement on the exact meaning of the term, and, so far as I know, no critic has ever offered a precise definition. This study attempts to work out a descriptive definition of the term "verse-novel", especially as it has been applied to longer Victorian narrative poems.

Two problems arise in attempting such a definition. First, while the term "verse" may be generally understood, the term "novel" has never been exactly defined or described. It is necessary, then, to examine the prose novel at considerable length to determine the special characteristics of the form. Then, since most critics insist that the novel is necessarily in prose, I examine the historical relationship between the prose-novel and verse. This examination shows that the novel, since its very beginning, has usually had some kind of relationship with verse.

Having determined the distinguishing features of the novel genre, and using as my touchstone the only English poem the major critics agree is a verse-novel, Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, I offer a tentative definition of the verse-novel. The verse-novel, however, in many respects resembles both the epic and the verse-romance. It is necessary, therefore, to ascertain the essential differences between these three forms of narrative.

To differentiate between the verse-novel and the epic I compare and contrast the special characteristics of each. Then, having examined a poem critics agree is an epic fragment, Matthew Arnold's Sohrab and Rustum, I apply my jury definition to Robert Browning's The Ring and the

Book in an attempt to determine whether it is an epic, as some critics say, or a verse-novel, as several others maintain.

Distinguishing between the verse-novel and the verse-romance is sometimes especially difficult. Like the term "novel", "romance" has apparently never been clearly defined. A romance, therefore, may be to one commentator an account of the strange, the wonderful, or the remote, and to another a story of love relations between the sexes. It is necessary, then, to examine the romance historically to establish the distinct features of the form. This done, I discuss the verse-romance in relation to the verse-novel. Then, having examined a poem critics agree is a verse-romance, William Morris' The Life and Death of Jason, I attempt to determine whether Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh, called by some critics a verse-romance, really fits my definition of a verse-novel.

Having tested my definition in this manner, I briefly examine other Victorian narrative poems critics have called verse-novels or verse-novelettes to further establish its validity. Finally, I offer a brief evaluation of the verse-novel in the Victorian Period.

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by

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PREFACE

The term "verse-novel", although most frequently employed by critics and literary historians early in the present century, has apparently been in existence for more than a hundred years. John Stuart Mill,¹ one of the first critics (as far as I can discover) to use the term, made a disparaging remark about the verse-novel in 1833.² Mill obviously did not consider it necessary to describe the genre at that time, nor, unfortunately for my study, did he refer to any specific examples of the form.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who was apparently the first poet to mention the term, declared while writing her Aurora Leigh (1857) that she was producing a novel-poem.

¹ I am indebted to Dr. E.R. Seary of Memorial University for calling my attention to Mill's early reference to the verse-novel.

² In the Monthly Repository (Jan. - Oct. 1833) Mill refers to the novel in verse as fare for excitement seekers (i.e. readers of novels) who also fancy themselves lovers of poetry. See The Six Great Humanistic Essays of John Stuart Mill, Albert William Levi, ed. (New York, 1963), p. 5.

She stated that the poem would "look into drawing rooms and the like" and "speak the truth out plainly," but she made no further comment on the genre, leaving the poem, no doubt, to speak for itself. After Mrs. Browning's reference to it, the term seems to have been rarely used for the rest of the nineteenth century.

Since 1900 the term "verse-novel" (or variants of it) has been quite frequently employed in discussions of certain long narrative poems of the Victorian Period. Critics, however, have applied the term very imprecisely. Quite often one finds a particular work referred to as a verse-novel by one critic, and as an epic by another. Again, a certain poem may be to one commentator a verse-novel, to a second a verse-romance. There seems to be no general agreement on the precise meaning of the term, and, so far as I can learn, no critic has ever offered an exact definition. This study attempts to work out a descriptive definition of the term "verse-novel", especially as it has been applied to longer Victorian narrative poems.

Two problems arise in attempting such a definition. First, while the term "verse" is in general acceptance, the term "novel" has never been sharply defined or described. It has seemed desirable, therefore, to examine the prose

novel³ at some length in an attempt to determine the special characteristics of the form. Then, since most definitions of the novel insist that it is necessarily in prose, I have considered it worthwhile to examine the historical relationship between prose fiction and verse. This examination attempts to show that, since its very beginning, the novel has had some kind of association with verse.

After I have determined the distinguishing features of the novel genre, I offer a tentative definition of the verse-novel, using as my touchstone the only English poem the major critics agree is a verse-novel, Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde. Since the verse-novel, however, in many respects resembles both the epic and the verse-romance, it has seemed necessary to establish the essential differences between these three forms. To do this, I first discuss the verse-novel in relation to the epic; then, having examined a poem critics

³ Since in this paper I have been primarily concerned with narrative of the Victorian Period, I have considered the verse-novel in terms of the realistic prose novel as it existed in that period.

agree is an epic fragment, Matthew Arnold's Sohrab and Rustum, I apply my jury definition to Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book in an attempt to determine whether it is an epic, as some critics say, or a verse-novel, as several others maintain. Next, having discussed the verse-novel in relation to the verse-romance, I examine William Morris' The Life and Death of Jason, usually regarded as a verse-romance; then try to decide whether Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh, referred to by some critics as a verse-romance, really fits my definition of the verse-novel.

Having tested my definition in this manner, I briefly examine other Victorian narrative poems that the critics have called verse-novels or verse-novelettes to further establish its validity. This done, I offer a brief evaluation of the verse-novel in the Victorian Period.

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CHAPTER I

THE VERSE-NOVEL

I - The Term "Verse-novel"

Though early twentieth century critics and literary historians often used the terms "verse-novel",¹ "novel in verse", and "novel-poem" in reference to such long narrative poems as Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, Crabbe's The Village, and Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book, they very seldom precisely described the genre, and never exactly defined the terms.

Because the term "verse-novel"² remained largely undefined, critics often applied it loosely. Geoffrey Bullough, for example, calls Clough's Amours de Voyage a

¹ The terms did not come into general use, it seems, before the present century.

² The terms "verse-novel", "novel in verse", and "novel-poem" are synonymous. I shall therefore refer only to the term "verse-novel", the most frequently used of the three.

verse-novel,³ while Hugh Walker speaks of it as a verse-romance.⁴ Again, V.S. Pritchett refers to Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book as a verse-novel,⁵ but J.D. Cooke and L. Stevenson describe it as a form of epic.⁶

Twentieth century critics have done nothing, so far as I know, to clarify the term "verse-novel". This chapter, therefore, will attempt to describe, and tentatively define, the form.

In attempting to define the verse-novel I shall first try to arrive at a working definition of its counterpart in prose. Next I shall examine, historically, the various kinds of relationship that have existed between the prose novel and poetry. Then I shall analyze the one long narrative poem critics agree is a verse-novel, Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, noting especially what characteristics of the novel it displays. Having done this, I shall present my working definition of "verse-novel".

³Mirror of Minds (Toronto, 1962), p. 180.

⁴Literature of the Victorian Era (Cambridge, 1921), p. 459.

⁵The New Statesman, XX (1940), p. 66.

⁶English Literature of the Victorian Period (New York, 1949), p. 117.

Since critics, as I said earlier, have often applied the terms "verse-novel", "epic", and "verse-romance" almost at random to various long narrative poems of the Victorian period, I shall, in subsequent chapters, examine several works⁷ that have been called both verse-novel and epic, or verse-novel and verse-romance. Applying my definition of verse-novel, I hope to differentiate between the three forms.

II - What is a Novel?

To determine the most important characteristics of the genre I shall now examine the novel in prose, a form more often discussed, and much better known, than the novel in verse.

A novel is a long narrative. Though there is some difference of opinion as to exactly how long a novel should be (E.M. Forster, for example, suggests that it ought to be over fifty thousand words,⁸ while Lionel Stevenson says that the minimum length of a novel is perhaps seventy thousand words⁹), the critics generally agree that it must be "of considerable

⁷I shall examine these poems in pairs. In each instance I shall first observe a poem upon whose classification the critics agree, then discuss another upon which there is some disagreement.

⁸Aspects of the Novel (London, 1927), p. 9.

⁹The English Novel (London, 1960), p. 6.

length".¹⁰ If we accept Mr. Forster's fifty thousand words as the minimum length (and this would seem to be one of the lowest figures suggested), then any fictitious prose narrative shorter than this should perhaps be considered only a novelette or a short story. In determining whether a particular poem is a verse-novel the length of the work will obviously be a factor to consider.

A novel is fiction. Because it is fictitious the novel can be distinguished from such genres as history or biography, which are, or at least should be, factual. Furthermore, the novel has certain peculiar capabilities that related genres do not possess.

A novel is a narrative. Narration implies a story, and virtually every novel has its story to tell. The story may be long and involved (as in Tolstoy's War and Peace), or it may be minimal (as in Joyce's Ulysses), but it is usually there, and it is considered by many an indispensable element of the novel.¹¹ The good novel, however, does not merely tell a story, does not simply relate a series of incidents and events in haphazard or episodic fashion; it is careful to

¹⁰Many critics, rather than state a specific figure, use a general descriptive phrase of this kind.

¹¹Sir Ifor Evans, for example, says that without the story fiction cannot live (See A Short History of English Literature, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1940, p. 191.)

reveal the associated causes and effects, without which the incidents and events lose much of their meaning and their drama. A good novel tells a plotted story. Plot, as Forster defines it, is "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality".¹² A novel is a plotted narrative.

A novel is usually in prose. Whether it must necessarily be written in prose is, however, a moot question. Most critics of the novel seem to assume that the only proper medium for the genre is prose. At least one critic, though, states that the novel might also be written in verse:

The inclusion of the word "prose" in our definition of the novel is ... pragmatic. Some historians of fiction insist that Chaucer displayed all the talents and techniques of the novelist and that his Troilus and Criseyde should be termed the first English novel. In the past century a few competent writers have produced what they described as "novels in verse", some of which enjoyed temporary success, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh and Owen Meredith's Lucile.¹³

"Long", "fictitious", "prose", "narrative" - virtually every description and definition of the prose novel includes these basic and generally accepted terms. While these terms are basic, however, they are unspecific, and so, other features of the genre will have to be considered and examined if we are to arrive at a more precise concept of the novel.

¹²Aspects of the Novel, p. 82.

¹³Lionel Stevenson, The English Novel, p. 7.

Critics generally agree that a good novel must display structural unity. Walter Allen, for example, says that, "a novel is a unity consisting of every word in it ... milieu, plot, character ... all of these, together with what other components a novel may have, condition and qualify one another."¹⁴ Lionel Stevenson states that, "considered as a work of art, a piece of fiction cannot be regarded as a novel unless it has unity of structure."¹⁵ And Dorothy Van Ghent says, "The sound novel, like a sound world, has to hang together as one thing. It has to have integral structure ... And like a world, a novel has individual character; it has, peculiar to itself, its own tensions, physiognomy, and atmosphere."¹⁶

There is general agreement, too, that a novel should be "life-like"; should present an "imitation of life". Percy Lubbock says, for instance, that, "the business of the novelist is to create life".¹⁷ Edwin Muir states that

¹⁴The English Novel (New York, 1954), p. xx.

¹⁵The English Novel (London, 1960), p. 8.

¹⁶The English Novel (New York, 1953), p. 6-7.

¹⁷The Craft of Fiction (London, 1921), p. 40.

"... the plot of the novel will be an image of life, not a mere record of experience".¹⁸ E.M. Forster comments, "The intensely, stiflingly human quality of the novel is not to be avoided; the novel is sogged with humanity; there is no escaping the uplift or the downpour".¹⁹ Walter Allen says, "... the novelist is a maker, he is making an imitation, an imitation of the life of man on earth. He is making, it might be said, a working model of life as he sees and feels it."²⁰ And Lionel Stevenson maintains that, "The essential quality for an acceptable novel is the illusion of reality".²¹

While critics often disagree on the exact interpretation of such terms as "realism", "life-like", and "imitation of life", most of them seem to agree with Stevenson that "the illusion of reality" is an essential characteristic of the novel.

From the beginning novelists have usually been

150. ¹⁸The Structure of the Novel (London, 1928), p. 149-

¹⁹Aspects of the Novel, p. 26.

²⁰The English Novel (New York, 1954), p. xvii.

²¹The English Novel (London, 1960), p. 7.

acutely conscious of the relationship between life as it is portrayed in the novel and the life of reality. The earliest novelists, perhaps better termed the pre-novelists, were so anxious for realism that they tried to pass off their stories as true accounts; Defoe is a well-known example. Since Richardson there have been many changes and developments in the novel, especially in matters of form and procedure. Consistently, however, most novelists have attempted to "imitate life", and to present in their novels their own particular version of reality, according to their own interpretations of that term. This statement is true even for such an unusual form as the Gothic novel. In the Gothic novel realism and probability were not entirely forgotten. Clare Reeve, for example, declared that she "wanted enough of the manners of real life to give an air of probability to the work",²² and Mrs. Radcliffe "offers at the close of her book neat naturalistic explanations for all the wonders the reader has met."²³

It is entirely appropriate that the novel should be so preoccupied with imitating life, since it is more capable of doing that than most other literary genres. History, for example, (to adopt an Aristotelian attitude) is inferior to

²²As cited in Cavalcade of the English Novel by Edward Wagenknecht (New York, 1943), p. 114.

²³Ibid., p. 121.

the novel in many ways. First, it can properly record only what actually has happened; while the novel, because it is fiction, can go much further and reveal what might have been and what should have been. More important, history usually shows us only the surface of men and events, those things that are apparent from the outside; while the novel can take us, and often does take us, inside men and events, into the minds and hearts of men, baring the most secret motive, and the most furtive passion.

Drama, too, is inferior to the novel in its ability to imitate life. Unlike the novel, it is handicapped spatially - the drama can in actual fact present only as much of life as it can crowd within the limiting confines of the stage.²⁴ Many of the situations of life involve great movements and wide-open spaces; these the drama must describe rather than actually present. Spatially, the novel is virtually unlimited.

Here, then, I believe, we have a distinctive characteristic of the novel: the novel is capable of imitating and representing life more successfully and more completely (and therefore more realistically) than any other literary form.

To achieve an imitation or representation of life, the novelist must be concerned with the creation of life-like

²⁴ Except, perhaps, in special instances such as Miller's Death of a Salesman.

characters. Lionel Stevenson's comments are pertinent:

... plausibility in the novel ... depends upon the portrayal of character. No matter how believable the action may be in itself, it does not win the reader's full credulity unless it is performed by distinct individuals who are recognizable in terms of our own experience. Conversely, he will believe in action that is inherently impossible, so long as the participants behave in a natural manner. 25

The novelist's interest in character, however, has not been simply utilitarian. The novelist has not been interested in character merely because well-drawn characters help to establish the air of reality that he probably considers essential to his novel. On the contrary, novelists have generally shown a prime interest in, perhaps we could go so far as to say a preoccupation with, character for character's sake. Some have even suggested that the novel has been evolved specifically for the purpose of expressing character:

I believe that all novels ... deal with character.... it is to express character - not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel ... has been evolved. 26

²⁵The English Novel, p. 7-8.

²⁶Virginia Woolf, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (1924), First printed in The Captain's Death Bed (1950). As cited in Novelists on the Novel by Miriam Allott (London, 1959), p. 29.

A glance back over the history of the novel would seem to confirm this statement. Novelists, generally, have lavished their greatest care and attention upon the people in their novels. And so it is that, since Richardson, the most impressive thing about the novel has not been the number of great plots it has presented, but rather the legion of unforgettable characters it has produced: characters such as Tom Jones, Parson Adams, Heathcliffe, Mrs. Gamp, and the like. The serious novel has usually been more concerned with people and their reactions to changing events, than it has with the actual bare events themselves: more interested in the element of character than that of story. It seems safe to say that its primary concern with character is a distinguishing feature of the novel.

As I previously observed, the novel has some distinct advantages over other literary forms in that it is able to render a far more complete imitation of life than they can. This is especially true in portraying life-like characters; here the novel is peerless. History, as E.M. Forster points out, is really handicapped in its presentation of character:

The historian deals with ... the characters of men only as far as he can deduce them from their actions. He is quite as much concerned with character as the novelist, but he can only know of its existence when it shows on the surface ... the hidden life ... is hidden. It is the function

of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source. 27

Drama, too is usually in a similar position. It cannot fluently reveal "the hidden life at its source"; the inner life can only, in effect, be suggested by gestures, by speeches, by actions, and sometimes by that unnatural device, the soliloquy. In character drawing the power of the novel is unique. The novelist is able to present his characters completely. He can show us the outward characteristics, the man as others see him, and he can also reveal the inner man - the man of passions and emotions. The novelist, as Forster says, is free to portray his characters as completely as he wishes:

The specialty of the novel is that the writer can talk about his characters as well as through them or can arrange for us to listen when they talk to themselves. He has access to self-communings, and from that level he can descend even deeper and peer into the subconscious. 28

People in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed. And this is why they often seem more definite than characters in history, or even our own friends; we have been told all about them that can be told; even if they are imperfect or unreal they do not contain any secrets, whereas our friends do and

27 Aspects of the Novel, p. 45.

28 Ibid., p. 81.

must, mutual secrecy being one of the conditions of life upon this globe. 29

In the realm of fiction the power to reveal character as completely as the author wishes would seem to be the exclusive property of the novel. This is a characteristic that will distinguish the novel from history, biography, or drama.

In summary, then, the chief distinguishing characteristics of the novel are: its special interest in character, its unique capability to portray character completely (revealing the inner as well as the outer man), and its ability to represent life more fully than any other literary form.

And so we would classify a lengthy piece of fiction as a novel if it is chiefly concerned with credible human beings (characters "recognizable in terms of our own experience"), if it involves those characters in incidents and situations resembling those of real life (recording not merely their external, but also their internal, reactions and responses, thus revealing their true natures), if it achieves that "illusion of reality" that Stevenson mentions, and if it displays structural unity. This may serve as a working definition of the prose novel.

²⁹Aspects of the Novel, p. 46-47.

III - The Historic Association of the Prose Novel and Verse

Although, as I noted earlier, prose has become the usual medium for the genre, there has been from the very beginning of the English novel some kind of association with verse. This association has usually taken one of three forms:

- (a) Interjecting verse (lyrics, ballads, etc.) into the novel;
- (b) Imitating some of the structures, devices, or forms of verse narrative, generally the epic and the mock-epic;
- (c) Writing a novel in a "poetic" style.

The practice of interjecting lyrics into the prose narrative goes back beyond Richardson. Many of the Elizabethan prose romances that are now often accepted as the immediate forerunners of the novel³⁰ contain ballads, love songs, ditties, and the like. Sidney's Arcadia and Lodge's Rosalynde are well-known examples.

The later "Elizabethan novels", those of Deloney, Greene, and Nashe, are much more realistic than the romances. Some of these, however, also contain poems. Deloney's Jack of Newbury, for example, has eight poems, mostly songs; Nashe's The Unfortunate Traveller has five or six of varying lengths.

³⁰Some critics maintain that they are novels, "Elizabethan novels". See George Saintsbury, The English Novel, pp. 33, 34.

After Richardson the practice of using poetry in the prose novel seemed more in vogue in some periods than in others. During the Romantic Period, for instance, the practice was fairly widespread. Sir Walter Scott used ballads and lyrics in many of his novels. Ivanhoe, Quentin Durward, and The Heart of Midlothian (with its well-known song "Proud Maisie") are notable examples. Thomas Love Peacock scattered lyrics throughout his seven novels. His "The War Song of Dinas Vawr", in The Misfortunes of Elphin, is widely known.

Those who used verse in their prose novels apparently believed that poetry contributed certain qualities to the novel that prose could not. The poetry, mainly love songs and lyrics, though sometimes sonnets and ballads, seemed especially useful in creating moods. Apparently many novelists, like such dramatists as Shakespeare, felt that nothing better intensifies an atmosphere of gaiety, sorrow, or romance than an appropriate song.

While many novelists included poems in their novels to obtain some special effect, very few imitated the structure or form of poetry. Two well-known novelists, however, Henry Fielding and James Joyce, did imitate, to some degree, the form and structure of the mock epic.

Henry Fielding himself called his Joseph Andrews "a comic epic poem in prose", and that novel does display

certain mock-epic characteristics.³¹ A better example of mock-epic, or "comic" epic, however, is his Tom Jones. Throughout this novel there is much Homeric parody; perhaps the best of this is Molly's comical battle in the churchyard. In epic fashion, Molly, wielding skull and thigh bone, overwhelms the enemy. In a subsequent apostrophe to the muse Fielding gives an account of those who "fell on this fatal day".³²

Parody of action and language, however, is not the only epic tendency of Tom Jones. As Aurelien Digeon, the French critic, points out, this novel has serious epic intentions:

Epics ... express, at a given moment, the soul of a generation, in all its fulness and all its depth In this sense Tom Jones often gives the impression of an epic. It is a picture of all England that we find there, and a picture of England at a moment when, suspended between her great past and her prodigious future, she was most limpidly herself. 33

Tom Jones has epic characters, Digeon states:

The characters in Tom Jones are epic ... by reason

³¹The mock-Homeric battle described in III, 6, for example.

³²Tom Jones, IV, 8.

³³The Novels of Fielding (London, 1925), pp. 179, 180.

of the number of enormous mishaps which befall them and which they overcome, and the fullness of life which results therefrom; a fullness which is all the more apparent because the connection between the different planes on which the figures move is so admirably maintained. Just as in the Iliad or the Odyssey the protagonists are thrown in high relief against a background of figures which are virtually anonymous, just as they are 'great' in comparison with the mass of humanity, the innumerable soldiers, servants, charioteers, and companions, so the important figures of Tom Jones, Western, and Sophia grow tall by comparison with the crowd of minor characters, which swarms about them on a lower plane. ³⁴

And then, in the epic fashion, there is Fielding's invocation to fame,³⁵ "written throughout", Digeon says, "in a style of firm and regular beauty".³⁶

Almost two centuries after Fielding produced Tom Jones, James Joyce imitated the epic in his novel Ulysses. Here again, as in Tom Jones, there is the epic intention to portray, not merely the individual, but the universal: "What Joyce is out to show is nothing less than all life, all history, contained in a single day in Dublin in 1904."³⁷

³⁴ The Novels of Fielding, p. 181.

³⁵ Tom Jones, Chap. xiii, p. 1.

³⁶ The Novels of Fielding, p. 189.

³⁷ Walter Allen, The English Novel, p. 426.

Ulysses in many respects parallels Homer's Odyssey. The characters resemble those of Homer: Leopold Bloom resembles Ulysses, Dedalus is Joyce's Telemachus, Marian Bloom his Penelope. While the Odyssey deals with a period of years and Joyce's Ulysses only a single day, nevertheless each episode in the novel, as Walter Allen points out, is made to correspond with an episode in the epic. The novel is a parody of Homer, Allen says, a true comic epic:

In Ulysses Joyce, more than Fielding ever did, is writing the comic epic, and the epic basis is even more essential to him than it was to Fielding. It was essential ... because it provided him with a structure for his novel. 38

In Fielding's Tom Jones and Joyce's Ulysses we have two examples of major works by important novelists in which, not merely the structure, but obviously the intentions, of the epic are clearly imitated. Both novelists probably believed that as a result their novels acquired a special depth, perhaps even a special significance, that prose form alone could not impart.

Perhaps the most important, and certainly the most continuous, association between the novel and verse is the use in the novel of what has been loosely termed a "poetic" style of writing.

³⁸The English Novel, p. 424.

Although critics have termed "poetic" the style of countless novels - from the Elizabethan pre-novels to many novels of the twentieth century - they have seldom precisely stated what the epithet "poetic" implies. Walter Allen, for example, comments on the style of two of the best-known pre-novels:

Euphues

It [Euphues] was a wholehearted attempt to give to prose the formal order and complexity of structure we find in much Elizabethan poetry. 39

Arcadia

Sidney, too, aimed at giving prose something of the formal pattern of verse, but, a better poet than Lyly, he was able to do something else, to give his prose, on occasion at any rate, the beauty of poetry. 40

Charles F. Horne, an early twentieth century American critic, gives a general, impressionistic view of "poetic" style in the novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

Goldsmith wrote with a simple melody which still retains its charm Mrs. Radcliffe brings her wording very close to poetry, and many a woman novelist has done so since Dickens' vast popular fame was due in part to the music of his lines Of high and felicitous taste in words have been such artists as Miss Austen, whose music is a constant pleasure to the practised ear....

39 The English Novel, p. 8.

40 Ibid., p. 9.

the intensely poetic prose of Poe the haunting melodies which float through Stevenson.... In Meredith's work appears the studied extravagance of the French school of epithet. ⁴¹

Walter Allen attempts to be more precise in his comments on the "poetic" style of George Meredith. A novelist, he states, achieves his poetic effects in two ways: by his "use of language", and by his "visionary intensity".⁴²

Robert M. Lovett and Helen S. Hughes, discussing the twentieth century novels of Virginia Woolf, give a somewhat more detailed description of "poetic" style:

... there is much of poetry in these [Virginia Woolf's] novels, not only in their conception and structure, their leaping over gaps of time, their drifting or lingering, but also in the language, teeming with metaphor and simile, with facile use of rhythm and refrain in thought and word. Part of the poetry is the result of sensibilities which link the inner life with outward manifestations, especially the manifestations of impersonal nature. Physical perception becomes an experience, emotional and intellectual, while the spiritual life overflows into physical experience. The vitality and richness of imagery, precise in feeling and in communication, give to Mrs. Woolf's writing a large abundance rare since Victorian days. ⁴³

⁴¹The Technique of the Novel (New York, 1908), pp. 240-43.

⁴²The English Novel, p. 275.

⁴³The History of the Novel in England (Cambridge, Mass., U.S.A., 1932), pp. 451-52.

Mrs. Woolf's novels, it would seem, are poetic for two reasons:

First, her language is poetic: "teeming with metaphor and simile", with "rhythm and refrain in thought and word", and with "vitality and richness of imagery ..."

And, second, she has what Walter Allen calls "visionary intensity", the acute sensibilities of a poet, the power to coordinate the various levels of experience: "the inner life is linked with the outward, physical perception is rendered emotional and intellectual, the spiritual becomes physical", and she has the ability to communicate "poetic" experience to others.

Mrs. Woolf's "magnificent prose"⁴⁴ novels are nearly poetry. When a novelist such as Virginia Woolf or George Meredith renders experience as a poet would: emphasizing the beautiful, the transcendental, the spiritual, the emotional; using rhythm, symbolism, figurative language, and the other devices of poetry, then the prose novel becomes "poetic", becomes, indeed, almost poetry itself.⁴⁵

Like the novelists who used poems in their novels,

⁴⁴ The History of the Novel in England, p. 452.

⁴⁵ This is particularly true of such a novel as Virginia Woolf's The Waves.

and like those who imitated the epic, Virginia Woolf, George Meredith, and the many others who used a "poetic" style, apparently believed that prose alone failed to achieve those special effects they desired; only poetry itself, or poetic form or style, would suffice.

IV - An Examination of an Alleged Verse-novel

The prose novel may, if the novelist so decides, make use of some of the devices, and attempt to achieve some of the effects, of verse. The converse of this also seems to be true: a poet may attempt in a narrative poem to achieve some of the qualities and some of the effects of the novel. Is such a narrative poem a verse-novel?

Though the critics disagree, as I noted earlier, whether certain Victorian long narrative poems are novels, the major critics almost unanimously declare that a fourteenth century poem, Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, is a verse-novel. Since there is such general agreement that this poem is a novel, I shall examine Troilus and Criseyde to determine which characteristics of the genre it displays.

G.L. Kittredge says that Troilus and Criseyde is the world's very first novel:

The Troilus is not merely ... the most beautiful long narrative poem in the English language; it is the first novel, in the modern sense, that ever was written in the world, and one of the best... the Troilus ... is an elaborate psychological novel, instinct with humour, and pathos, and passion, and

human nature ... He [Chaucer] would change the tale if he could, but he must tell the truth, though it is almost more than he can bear ... the Troilus is a tragedy of character - profoundly moving and profoundly ethical. ⁴⁶

Kittredge apparently regards Troilus and Criseyde as a novel because it is a "tragedy of character". Earlier I stressed the fact that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the novel is its prime concern with character. Again, I felt that the novel is greatly interested in "realism", and the "illusion of reality". Kittredge feels that the Troilus deals with the "truth", i.e. real-life incidents and situations.

W. P. Ker says of the Troilus:

Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde is the poem in which medieval romance passes out of itself into the form of the modern novel. What Cervantes and what Fielding did was done first by Chaucer; and this was the invention of a kind of story in which life might be represented no longer in conventional or abstract manner, or with sentiment or pathos instead of drama, but with characters adapting themselves to different circumstances ... moving freely and talking like men and women. ⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Chaucer and his Poetry (Cambridge, 1925), p. 109 ff.

⁴⁷ Epic and Romance (London, 1926), pp. 367-8.

Ker suggests that Troilus and Criseyde is a novel, mainly for two reasons: the poem represents (i.e. imitates) life, not abstractly, but realistically (in other words, it creates the "illusion of reality"), and it presents realistic characters, "adapting themselves ... to circumstances" and talking "like men and women". Again this agrees with our previous description of the novel as presenting real-life situations and realistic characters.

A contemporary critic, John Speirs, says that Troilus and Criseyde is really the first modern novel:

... for readers accustomed to modern literature - not only non-dramatic poetry, but dramatic poetry and novels - Chaucer is the medieval author who is likely to appear most familiar and congenial In Troilus and Criseyde he gave the world what is virtually the first modern novel. In The Canterbury Tales he developed his art of poetry still further towards drama and towards the art of the novel. 48

... the medieval convention of courtly love is ... handled critically in this poem [Troilus and Criseyde]. This criticism of conventions is ... not abstract, but is presented, as by a great novelist, in terms of contrasts between flesh-and-blood persons - Pandarus, Criseyde, Troilus - and of live and developing human relationships. Thus Pandarus, the first great comic creation in English, contrasts with Troilus, the courtly lover of trouvère poetry; Criseyde, so various, so alive, seems to fluctuate between the two, though she is always a vivid and complex individual, the

⁴⁸"A Survey of Medieval Verse", The Age of Chaucer Boris Ford ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1958), p. 20.

first complex character of a woman in English Literature. ⁴⁹

John Speirs sees the Troilus as a novel because of its "flesh-and-blood persons" (the credible human beings of our working definition), its "live and developing human relationships" (I spoke of this as characters involved in incidents and situations resembling those of real life), and because Criseyde is "a vivid and complex individual, a complete character of a woman" (the specialty of the novel, I stated earlier, is the presentation of such complete characters).

Walter Allen comes closest to calling Troilus and Criseyde a novel in verse. He does actually use the term, but with the qualifying statement "as though [it] were":

The drama apart, the only works in English before Bunyan that have the quality of novels as we know them today, though they do not have their form, are some things in Chaucer, the prologue to The Canterbury Tales perhaps, the Wife of Bath's Tale and Troilus and Criseyde In these works of Chaucer there is a warm delight in character for its own sake and a compassionate realism in the observation of behaviour comparable to what we find in the novels of Fielding ... We almost automatically read Troilus and Criseyde and [Henryson's] Testament of Cressid as though they were novels in verse. ⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

⁵⁰ The English Novel, p. 4-5.

Once again we have a critic who speaks of Chaucer's "novel" with its "delight in character for its own sake" and its "compassionate realism". Again, this agrees with our earlier description of the novel.

Because the critics are so certain this poem is a verse-novel, it seems reasonable to concur with John Speirs' pronouncement that "Chaucer virtually invents the English novel in Troilus and Criseyde". 51

V - The Verse-novel Tentatively Defined

Bearing in mind the characteristics of the novel we observed in Troilus and Criseyde, and using our working definition of the prose novel as a further basis, we can now offer a tentative definition of the verse-novel.

A poem is a verse-novel when it tells a long fictitious story mainly about people. The characters in the story must be realistic, life-like human beings "recognizable in terms of our own experience". Such a poem, like the novel in prose, will focus our attention upon its characters; these will live and develop as the poem progresses, being altered and shaped by the various stresses and crises they encounter. The situations and incidents in the verse-novel must be like life in that they are entirely possible and even probable,

51 The Age of Chaucer, p. 57.

yet unlike life in that they are selected, woven into a pattern, and made into a unity - "the world of the novel".

Essentially, then, the characteristics of the verse-novel are the same as those of the novel in prose, with the obvious difference that the language is poetry.

Just as the prose novel is so "amorphous"⁵² and so imprecisely defined, and is often confused with the romance, so the boundaries that separate the verse-novel from its related genres - the long narrative poem, the epic, and the verse-romance - are not always sharp and distinct. It is sometimes difficult, therefore, to determine without careful analysis whether a particular long narrative poem is a verse-novel or one of the other forms.

We can distinguish between a novel and what is simply a long narrative poem by observing where the chief emphasis is placed. If the poem seems mainly interested in the story it tells, and expends most of its energies on that story, then it is probably nothing more than a long narrative poem. If the poem is chiefly preoccupied with character, and makes its story element subservient to that of character, then there is a strong possibility that it is a verse-novel.

⁵² The term is E.M. Forster's (Aspects of the Novel, p. 9.).

It is not quite so easy to separate the verse-novel from the epic or the verse-romance. These three forms all have certain characteristics in common, but there are also some significant differences. These similarities and differences are important enough to merit further discussion; consequently, the relationship between the verse-novel and the epic, and between the verse-novel and the verse-romance, will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER II

THE VERSE-NOVEL AND THE EPIC

Critics and literary historians sometimes do not agree whether certain Victorian long narrative poems are verse-novels or epics.¹ Though these two forms may have characteristics in common, there are certain distinct differences between them. I shall now examine the verse-novel and the epic to determine those differences. Having done this, it should be possible to establish whether a particular poem is a novel or an epic.

Because the critics have not yet clearly defined the verse-novel, and because there are few poems that critics agree are verse-novels, I must compare and contrast the epic and the novel in prose, bearing in mind my previous conclusion that both forms of the novel are basically similar except that one is prose, the other verse.

¹ Various critics, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, have called Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book both a verse-novel and a form of epic.

I - The Differences Between the Novel and the Epic

Because the verse-novel and the epic are narrative forms, both are obviously concerned with telling a story and with action. Each is concerned, however, with a distinct type of action.

Aristotle maintained that the action in the epic must be a great or important action, and poets and critics since have, like W. Macneile Dixon, tended to agree: "... the action, as we perceived by Aristotle, must be great or important action, and the characters great or important characters."² By tradition, then, the epic has dealt with matters and topics of national, international, or cosmic interest: the fall of Troy, the founding of Rome, the glory of England, the fall of man.

The novel, whether in prose or verse, is seldom concerned with action on a grand scale, such a novel as War and Peace being the exception rather than the rule. The novelist is usually not so much interested in nations as he is in individuals. Whenever he deals with major events that shape a nation or state, as in Gone With the Wind or (Chaucer's) Troilus and Criseyde, for example, the

² English Epic and Heroic Poetry (London, 1912), pp. 21-2.

novelist makes us see things through the eyes of certain characters who are caught up in the events. His chief concern, usually, is for those incidents and situations that affect the individuals, either singly, in families, or in relatively small groups. Sometimes, as in a chronicle novel such as Galsworthy's Forsyte Saga, the novel will survey more than one generation of men and events, but again, the emphasis is on the individuals and their relationships with others. The chief interest of the novel is the human, not the superhuman. The birth of a nation or the fall of a society is often the chief concern of an epic; the love affair of a Troilus and Criseyde, the escapades of a Tom Jones, the social development of a Fanny Price, the vicissitudes of an Oliver Twist, or the "vulgar consciousness"³ of a Leopold Bloom are more likely subjects for a novel.

There is a difference too in the degree of stress that these two narrative forms place upon action. Story, as C.M. Bowra points out, is the chief concern of the epic: "The first concern of heroic poetry is to tell of action ... heroic poetry makes its first and strongest appeal through its story."⁴

³ George Sampson, The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature (Cambridge, 1959), p. 972.

⁴ Heroic Poetry (London, 1952), p. 48.

The main business of the Iliad is to relate the story of the fall of Troy, while that of Paradise Lost is to tell of the fall of man. The "important action" of the epic tends to overshadow the element of character.

While the story may be of considerable importance to the novel, it is certainly not its chief concern. The novelist, as I previously pointed out, focuses our attention primarily on character. Henry James (agreeing with Ivan Turgenieff) states that, for him (James), the novel begins with characters: around his characters a setting is constructed, an appropriate story is woven:

I might envy, though I couldn't emulate, the imaginative writer so constituted as to see his fable first and to make out its agents afterwards: I could think so little of any fable that didn't need its agents positively to launch it; I could think so little of any situation that didn't depend for its interest on the nature of the persons situated, and thereby on their way of taking it. ⁵

Virginia Woolf succinctly summarized the main business of the novel in her statement: "I believe it is to express character ... that the form of the novel ... has been evolved."⁶

⁵ Preface to The Portrait of a Lady (1881); first printed in the New York edition of the Novels and Stories 1907-17), Vol. III.

⁶ See Chapter I, p. 10.

Not only is the novel more concerned with character than the epic is, but it is also concerned with a different type of character. Epic poetry is heroic, and so its characters are usually, as Bowra points out, of a certain rather fixed type:

In the poetry of heroic action leading parts are assigned to men of superior gifts, who are presented and accepted as being greater than other men Since heroic poetry treats of action and appeals to the love of prowess, its chief figures are men who display prowess to a high degree because their gifts are of a very special order A hero differs from other men in the degree of his powers. ⁷

The epic hero, then, is a figure of larger-than-life size, a man "of superior gifts", displaying "prowess to a high degree", with "gifts ... of a very special order". Since the novel proposes to imitate or represent life, its characters will not be of the fixed heroic type suggested by Bowra, but rather, one might expect to find in it such a diversity of characters as are to be found in life itself. Unlike the epic hero with his superior gifts, the protagonist of the novel is often a run-of-the-mill type character with a mixture of good and bad characteristics. Many novelists feel about their characters as George Sand does:

I want to see man as he really is. He is

⁷ Heroic poetry, p. 91.

neither good nor bad. But he is something else besides ... being both good and bad, he possesses an inner force that drives him to be very bad and a bit good, or else very good and a bit bad. 8

The basic difference, it seems, between the characters of the epic and those of the novel is that the epic portrays heroes, the novel ordinary men.

Another important difference between the epic and the verse-novel is that of style and tone. Because he is dealing with heroic material the epic poet will usually attempt what Matthew Arnold called the "grand style". The "grand style" implies elevated language, dignity of tone, epic similes, the atmosphere of grandeur. W. P. Ker says that Beowulf, Waldere, Roland, and William of Orange are epics because:

... these are poems in which ... the ideas of their times are conveyed and expressed in a noble manner They are heroic in the nobility of their temper and their style. 9

⁸ Letter to Gustave Flaubert (18-19 December 1875), Correspondence (1892), as cited in Novelists on the Novel by Miriam Allott (London, 1959), p. 278.

⁹ Epic and Romance (London, 1926), p. 14.

And at another point he speaks of "Epic magnificence and the dignity of heroic poetry".¹⁰ W. Macneile Dixon says that, "the peculiar character of an epic poem is dignity and elevation".¹¹ Again, he says:

... great actions and great characters impart that dignity, the uplifting strain, without which the poem lays no claim to epic honours, a certain elevation of tone, proper to the theme and the conduct of the theme. Nor is it sufficient that this dignity or elevation be occasionally felt, it must pervade the whole, it must be sustained throughout. ¹²

Conscious of the traditional dignity and the magnificence of the epic, the poet will usually avoid any discussion of the homely or the commonplace. Occasionally there may be little touches of human interest, the type of human interest frequently in the novel - Ulysses' dog recognizing him after his prolonged absence, and Hector's son fearing his father's helmet, for example,- but incidents such as these are rare and exceptional. After all, the epic hero is "a man of deeds, not of feelings".¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 24

¹¹ English Epic and Heroic Poetry, p. 2.

¹² Ibid., p. 22.

¹³ Ibid., p. 295.

The novelist, because he wishes to imitate "real life", must eschew the "grand style" of the epic, since too much "dignity" and "magnificence" endanger the very atmosphere of realism that he hopes to achieve. The style of the novel must be clear and simple says Stendhal: "I know of only one rule: style cannot be too clear, too simple ..." ¹⁴ The language of the novel, says Charles F. Horne, must be real and simple:

... if the novel aims to reproduce real life, and to be a simplification of life, its diction must be both real and simple. Upon the novel emphatically seems laid the command to avoid all pomposity and ornateness. ¹⁵

George Eliot seems to go even a step further. She suggests that a familiar and colloquial style is a characteristic, not only of the novel, but also of all fiction "of the first class":

The writers who dare to be thoroughly familiar are Shakespeare, Fielding, Scott (where he is expressing the popular life with which he is familiar), and indeed every other writer of fiction of the first class. Even in his

¹⁴ Letter to Balzac (Oct. 30, 1840), first draft, Selected Letters, trans. by Norman Cameron (1952).

¹⁵ The Technique of the Novel (New York, 1908), p. 238.

loftiest tragedies - in Hamlet, for example - Shakespeare is intensely colloquial. One hears the very accent of living men. 16

While the language and style of some novels, as I noted in the previous chapter, may be "poetic", generally the novel tends toward the simple, the natural, the colloquial, and the prosaic.

In summary, the chief differences between the epic and the novel are these:

First, the epic deals with "great and important action", while the novel, as Horne puts it, "aims to reproduce real life" (i.e. to reproduce or imitate in fiction the kind of characters and situations that are often found in real life). Second, the epic is concerned with "great characters";¹⁷ the novel with individuals "recognizable in terms of our own experience".¹⁸

Third, the epic is written in a style and tone "commensurate with the lordliness of its theme",¹⁹ while the language of

¹⁶ Letter to Francois D'Albert Durade (Jan. 29, 1861), Letters (1954).

¹⁷ English Epic and Heroic Poetry, p. 24.

¹⁸ Lionel Stevenson, The English Novel, p. 8.

¹⁹ English Epic and Heroic Poetry, p. 24.

the novel is usually more natural and prosaic, more appropriate to its imitation of real life.

II - An Examination of an Epic and a Verse-novel

Using the above points of difference as guidelines, I shall now examine a long narrative poem of the Victorian Period - Matthew Arnold's Sohrab and Rustum - to see why critics have consistently classified it as an epic fragment or epic episode, rather than as a verse-novel.

Sohrab and Rustum tells the story of Rustum, a Persian epic hero, and Sohrab, his son by a princess whom he had loved in youth. Sohrab knows the identity of his famous father and longs to find him. Rustum, however, does not even know that he has a son. Rustum becomes the champion of the Persian armies, and Sohrab, eventually, of the Tartar. The Persians and Tartars meet in battle, and the two champions meet in single combat. Rustum fights under a false name, though Sohrab suspects the identity of his antagonist and begs him to reveal himself. Rustum admires Sohrab and urges him to quit the unequal contest, but the youth will not withdraw and Rustum will not disclose his true identity. At the climax of their fight Rustum shouts his name to terrorize his antagonist; the astonished Sohrab drops his guard and Rustum pierces his side with the spear. The dying Sohrab reveals to Rustum that he is his son. Convinced of the truth of this, and realizing that he

has indeed killed his own son, Rustum is grief-stricken and wishes to die. Sohrab comforts his father and asks that he spare the Tartar forces. Rustum watches his son die; then lies prone beside him on the sand as the cold darkness of night falls around them.

Regarded as an epic fragment, or epic episode, by most critics, mainly because it is not long enough to be considered a full-blown epic, Sohrab and Rustum has many characteristics of the epic genre. The tragic situation in this "most Homeric"²⁰ of Arnold's poems is reminiscent of Greek tragedy:

Sohrab, the mighty Rustum's son, lies there,
Whom his great father did in ignorance kill. 21

This is the type of incident found in such works as Sophocles' Oedipus (though in Oedipus matters are reversed and the son in ignorance kills the father). Such circumstances, though not entirely unsuitable for a novel, are not really typical of a genre that attempts to "reproduce real life"; this kind of situation seldom occurs in real life.

²⁰ The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature, p. 713.

²¹ "Sohrab and Rustum", Poetical Works, (London, 1929).

As in the Iliad the Greek and Trojan forces stand opposed to each other, so in Sohrab and Rustum the Persians confront the Tartars. The business of the poem, like that of such epics as the Iliad or Roland, is war; and the atmosphere is martial. Sohrab and Rustum are warriors in the type of warlike, heroic environment that bred the epic. The action in this poem, national rather than individual in character, can more properly be termed "great and important action" than that which "reproduces real life".

Sohrab and Rustum are characters more suited to the epic than to the novel. Rustum, as an epic hero, may be described as "greater than other men", displaying "prowess to a high degree". He is called "the mighty Rustum" and he is addressed by his son as "thou dreadful man". Rustum is a larger-than-life size man, a man of the calibre of Ulysses or Roland. Sohrab, like his father, is a great and fearless fighter, the greatest man of the Tartar armies, their single champion. Such figures do not properly belong within the novel: they are not the kind of individuals who are "recognizable in terms of our own experience".

The style and the tone of Sohrab and Rustum is epic rather than novelistic. Arnold made no secret of the fact that he greatly admired Homer:

I fearlessly assert that Herman and Dorothea, Childe Harold, Jocelyn, The Excursion, leave the reader cold in comparison with the effect produced upon him by the latter books of the Iliad. 22

... in the sincere endeavour to learn and practise, amid the bewildering confusion of our times, what is sound and true in poetical art, I seemed to myself to find the only sure guidance, the only sure footing, among the ancients. 23

Homer's style, he felt, was a "grand style". The outstanding features of the "grand style", according to Arnold, were: rapidity of movement, plainness and directness in the evolution and expression of the thought, and eminent nobility. In Sohrab and Rustum Arnold seems to have imitated the "grand style" of Homer. The language of the poem is plain and direct: i.e. simple and straight-forward, yet there is an air of epic "dignity" and "nobility". The passage describing Rustum's reaction to the death of Sohrab is perhaps typical:

So, on the bloody sand, Sohrab lay dead.
And the great Rustum drew his horseman's cloak
Down o'er his face, and sate by his dead son.
As those black granite pillars, once high-rear'd,
By Jemshid in Persepolis, to bear

22 Preface to Poems (Edition of 1853).

23 Ibid.

His house, now, mid their broken flights of steps,
Lie prone, enormous, down the mountainside -
So in the sand lay Rustum by his son. 24

This passage illustrates, not only the epic style and tone of Sohrab and Rustum, but also the epic manner of handling its subject, a mode distinctly different from that of the novel. The situation here - the grief-stricken father bending over his dead son, the son that he had so recently discovered and had "in ignorance" killed - is not really inappropriate for a novel, but Sohrab and Rustum, the epic fragment, does not use the novelistic approach. The novel would very probably focus attention upon Rustum the human being, as a heart-broken father. It would likely emphasize the pathetic human emotions of the tragic moment, reveal the broken heart, the anguished sobs of regret, the fatherly tears. As a character in the novel, a human being "recognizable in terms of our own experience", Rustum would surely arouse our deepest sympathies and our affection. But Rustum is an epic hero. The epic is not so concerned with pathos, but with heroism and nobility. The great Rustum is a tragic figure at the death of his son, but he is a noble and heroic tragic figure. As he lies prone on the sand by the dead Sohrab he is something more than human. As an heroic figure he wins our admiration, but not much of our sympathy.

24 "Sohrab and Rustum", Poetical Works, (London, 1929).

Admiration - the epic; sympathy - the novel. These two forms of narrative may arouse in the reader a different kind of emotional response. Because epic action is great and extraordinary, and the epic hero is superhuman, it is difficult, perhaps somewhat unnatural, for the reader to completely associate himself with either. There is a tendency to stand back and admire the greater-than-life size figure involved in superhuman activities. The epic evokes awe and admiration. Because action in the novel imitates that of real life, however, and the people in the novel resemble real people, it is easy and quite natural for the reader to associate himself with both. The novel stimulates empathy.

Because it presents a situation that resembles that of various epics (heroes involved in war and combat), because its chief characters resemble those of the epic (superhuman, martial figures), and because the language and style of the poem seem to imitate those of Homer, we can conclude that Sohrab and Rustum is, as the critics state, an epic fragment, and not a verse-novel.

While the critics agree that Sohrab and Rustum is an epic fragment, they do not agree on the classification of Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book. John D. Cooke and Lionel Stevenson, for example, refer to the poem as "an

epic of the dramatic monologue"²⁵ and "an epic of psychological analysis".²⁶ Osbert Burdett also implies that the poem is an epic.²⁷ V.S. Pritchett,²⁸ J.W. Beach,²⁹ and L.G. Salingar,³⁰ however, classify it as a novel in verse. Henry James maintains that all the elements of a good novel may be found in The Ring and the Book. Browning himself did not indicate what he intended the poem to be.

To determine, therefore, whether The Ring and the Book is really an epic or a verse-novel, I shall first examine what the various critics have said on each side, then, as with Sohrab and Rustum, I shall follow the guidelines established earlier in this chapter.

Those who refer to The Ring and the Book as an epic seldom attempt to justify such a reference. Sometimes a

²⁵ English Literature of the Victorian Period, p. 117.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 154.

²⁷ The Brownings (London, 1933), p. 287.

²⁸ The New Statesman, XX (1940), p. 66.

²⁹ H. Craig et al, A History of English Literature (New York, 1950), pp. 570-73.

³⁰ "Robert Browning", From Dickens to Hardy, p. 254.

brief explanation is offered. Cooke and Stevenson say:

Just as Tennyson without actually using the term epic, actually wrote one, so also did Browning. The Ring and the Book, even to its conventional twelve parts, is an epic of the dramatic monologue; and its controlling theme is this matter of the relativity of truth, the undependability of any single witness, and the slow emergence of acceptable hypothesis from accumulated testimony. As such, it might also be called an epic of the scientific method. 31

The fact that the poem has twelve parts, and that it has a controlling theme, is insufficient reason to classify it as an epic. A verse-novel or a verse-romance might just as well have twelve parts, and a controlling theme. Evidence of this kind is purely circumstantial. Other pieces of what might be termed physical evidence are equally inconclusive. C.H. Herford, for example, notes that Browning opens and closes the poem with an invocation, in the manner of an epic:

Browning, no friend of the conventions of poetic art, entered on and closed his giant task with an invocation to the "Lyric Love", as it were the Urania, or heavenly Muse, of a modern epic. 32

The "invocation", however, rather than being an epic

31 English Literature of the Victorian Period, p. 117.

32 Robert Browning (1905), pp. 170-71.

invocation, is more probably intended (as Osbert Burdett suggests)³³ as an apostrophe to Mrs. Browning, who had died not very long before the poem was published, and whom the poet still missed very keenly.

Apart from its "conventional twelve parts", and its epic length, there seem to be other epic tendencies in The Ring and the Book. William C. Devane, citing Professor Hodel, states that in the poem Caponsacchi becomes St. George, (a heroic figure appropriate enough for an epic) and that the date of Pompilia's rescue is moved from April 29, when it actually happened, to April 23, St. George's Day.³⁴ Again, he notes that Browning used the Perseus-Andromeda myth and its cognate legend of St. George slaying the dragon no less than thirty times in The Ring and the Book.³⁵ Devane makes further implications of epic when he suggests that The Ring and the Book shows some resemblance to Milton's Paradise Lost:

... a much truer comparison may be drawn to Paradise Lost. For Browning's poem, like Milton's, is finally an attempt to justify the ways of God

³³ The Brownings, p. 289.

³⁴ A Browning Handbook (New York, 1935), p. 339.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 345.

to man, to show that everywhere in the world God has set himself to meet evil in mortal combat. 36

And then, in an apparent attempt to strengthen the suggestion of epic, he states:

Browning made a section of obscure Italian history into a reading of life as he viewed it in his own day. 37

And again he repeats:

Above all, Browning has given us, not history, but an idealized reading of life. 38

But if The Ring and the Book gives us Browning's views of life, and his own reading of life, as Devane says, then it is doing just what a critic such as Walter Allen suggests the novel does:

... every novel is an extended metaphor of the author's view of life - on life itself
Every novelist, then, gives us in his novels his own personal, idiosyncratic vision of the world. 39

36 A Browning Handbook, p. 346.

37 Ibid., p. 339.

38 Ibid., p. 346.

39 The English Novel, p. xx.

Osbert Burdett is another Browning scholar who implies that Browning's treatment of his subject is epic:

Browning stretches out his hand, like a God in the fresco of Michael Angelo, grips a group of common humanity, and wrings it like a sponge. Blood, tears, humour, pedantry, hate, endurance, loyalty, love, and judgment drip upon the ground. The poetic feat is comparable to the painting of a vast ceiling.⁴⁰

Burdett's metaphoric suggestion of epic is considerably weakened, however, by a statement that immediately precedes the one above: "The murder of Pompilia by her husband is a common murder, concerning ordinary folk".⁴¹ "Common murder", "concerning ordinary folk" - such a situation and such characters are incongruent with the "important action" and "great characters" that traditionally have been associated with the epic.

While scholars obviously felt they had some reasons to call The Ring and the Book an epic, there are even more reasons for classifying it as a verse-novel.

⁴⁰ The Brownings, p. 287-8.

⁴¹ The Ring and the Book tells the story of a murder trial that took place in Rome in 1698. The chief characters involved were: Count Guido Franceschini, a middle-aged, impoverished nobleman, charged with the murder of his young, allegedly adulterous wife Pompilia (Comparini); Canon Caponsacchi, a young priest who assisted Pompilia in escaping from her tyrannous husband; the counsels for the prosecution and the defence; and the Pope, to whom Guido had appealed for clerical immunity.

Story, as Bowra reminds us, has always been the chief concern of the epic. The epic tends to expand its story from book to book, adding more incidents, describing further events. But story is not the chief concern of The Ring and the Book. Though the poem consists of twelve books, the entire story is told in Book One. Subsequently the story is retold several times from different points of view, but essentially the same series of events is described. The story is expanded, not incrementally in width, as in the epic, but rather psychologically in depth, as in the novel. In the first book Browning tells the story of the murder trial and the events that preceded the trial. In the second, third, and fourth book the story is told again from the point of view of three different representatives of the Roman public, three of Rome's "men in the street". In Book Five Count Guido, the accused husband, tells his version of the affair. Caponsacchi, the priest, gives his side of the story in Book Six. The story is retold once again in Book Seven, this time by Pompilia, the abused wife. In Books Eight and Nine the counsels for the prosecution and the defence retrace events once again. The Pope in Book Eleven carefully reconsiders the whole affair in an attempt to determine the real truth. Finally, Browning sums matters up in the twelfth book. Though the point of view is different, and the emphasis is different, with each telling of the story, the actual events themselves remain the same. The first book gives all

the facts of the case. After the First Book, then, the story itself cannot be the chief source of interest for the reader - the characters, their passions and their motives, become the real source of interest. Edward Dowden says:

It was ... the probing and the exposition of character that interested him [Browning] before all else in his dealing with the Roman murder-case of 1698 We could not tolerate the recital of the Old Bailey story, from different points of view, by speaker after speaker, if the story were the chief thing. ⁴²

And "The whole object of the poem", according to Hugh Walker, "is the revelation of character", ⁴³ and that, I have been maintaining, is the business and purpose of the novel.

Not only does The Ring and the Book place more emphasis on character than on story, but it also tells a story that is far more appropriate to the novel than to the epic. The Guido-Pompilia-Caponsacchi affair is not a national or international matter that would concern an epic, but rather it is a domestic and personal affair (a heightened and dramatized version of the "eternal triangle" ⁴⁴ situation

⁴² The Ring and the Book, ed. Edward Dowden (London, 1912), p. ix, x.

⁴³ The Literature of the Victorian Era, p. 430.

⁴⁴ The Iliad has an "eternal triangle" affair as its basis (Menelaus-Helen-Paris). The epic Iliad does not dwell on the triangle situation, however, as Browning does, but uses it only as a causal incident.

really), typical fare for the novelist.

According to Henry James, the "horrid little drama" of The Ring and the Book is appropriate for prose fiction, i.e. the novel:

The great thing is that I have such a group of figures moving across so constituted a scene - figures so typical, so salient, so reeking with the old-world character, so impressed all over with its manners and its morals, and so predestined, we see, to this particular horrid little drama. And let me not be charged with giving it away, the idea of the latent prose fiction, by calling it little and horrid. ⁴⁵

The "horrid little drama" - the story told in The Ring and the Book - is essentially a crime story, "an Old Bailey story", as Carlyle called it; this is very unusual material for an epic. Even Osbert Burdett who called the poem an epic felt obliged to explain the unusual subject matter:

The second fact to note about The Ring and the Book is that it differs from traditional epics in eschewing an heroic hero and heroic story ... the poem is a masterpiece for the intense and various interest that is squeezed out of an old piece of police-court news. ⁴⁶

Dealing with a common murder case and a murder trial, "police-court news", is certainly different from the traditional epic practice: but such a situation is commonplace for the novel.

⁴⁵ Notes on Novelists with Some Other Notes (New York, 1914), p. 403.

⁴⁶ The Brownings, p. 287.

As the situation in The Ring and the Book is typical of the novel, so, indeed, are the characters. The conventional epic portrays heroes: physically strong, martial men, men "of superior gifts", "greater than other men", displaying "prowess to a high degree". There is really no such character in The Ring and the Book.

Caponsacchi is the "hero" of the piece, but his heroism is spiritual rather than physical. Besides, Caponsacchi is a human being, not a superhuman figure. Though he is a priest, he has many of the imperfections of ordinary men - an eye for attractive young ladies, for example. Perhaps the Pope may be considered a greater-than-life size figure. But here, too, Browning gives us a human being. The Pope is an old man conscious of his age and conscious of the heavy responsibility that is his in deciding the fate of Guido. If he were some kind of superhuman epic figure, the Pope would quickly arrive at a decision; epic heroes are notably self-confident. The humanity of the Pope reveals itself time and time again as he reasons out a decision, very much aware of the fact that he may be wrong, but consoling himself with the thought that he is doing his best. All the rest of Browning's characters are representative human beings, people "recognizable in terms of our own experience", people of the novel.

As they usually do in a good novel, the characters

in The Ring and the Book develop. Pompilia, for example, changes a great deal as the action of the poem progresses. At first she is a simple, naive, passive child. Then, as a result of her terrible sufferings at Arezzo, Pompilia becomes a mature, courageous woman; she begins to "shine defiantly", as Henry James puts it:

Pompilia's inspired little character, clear silver hardened, effectually beaten and battered, to steel, begins to shine at the blackness with a light that fairly outfaces at last the gleam of wolfish fangs. 47

Finally, as she is about to become a mother, she passes into a state of radiant womanhood that Hugh Walker describes as infinitely touching:

The development in her nature, brought about by the sense of coming motherhood, is infinitely touching. Hitherto she had been first the simple, harmless, colourless girl, and then the patient, down-trodden wife. Now she suddenly reveals herself the heroine It is a transformation almost like the change from chrysalis to butterfly. 48

Caponsacchi changes and develops too. At first he is a shallow young man without much purpose in life. After his rescue of Pompilia and their subsequent sufferings together, Caponsacchi becomes, according to Henry James, the essence of a man:

47 Notes on Novelists, p. 405.

48 The Literature of the Victorian Era, p. 431.

... having passed through the smoky fires of life [Caponisacchi emerges] clear and high ... he is the soul of man at its finest. 49

Even Guido, the villain, progresses (regresses, really) from "the man of intellect" that he is in Book Five, the man "capable of self control after his sufferings in the torture chamber, ingenious in sophistry, keen in irony, clear-sighted, and cool enough to take advantage of every point that may tell in his favour";⁵⁰ to the "wolfish" Guido that he is in Book Eleven, "a man motivated by sheer hatred of his superiors, his church, and above all of Pompilia".⁵¹ These three main characters, then, are, in the manner of the good novel, most carefully drawn. Henry James states that they are quite important characters:

... it [The Ring and the Book] gives us in the rarest manner three characters of the first importance the three built up at us each with an equal genial rage of reiterative touches. 52

Novelists have commonly believed, as Walter Allen

⁴⁹ Notes on Novelists, p. 396.

⁵⁰ Edward Dowden, The Ring and the Book, Oxford Edition (London, 1912), p. xi.

⁵¹ Devane, p. 336.

⁵² Notes on Novelists, p. 403.

observes,⁵³ that an important part of their function has been to create new characters. In The Ring and the Book Browning has done just that. Some of the minor characters (Half-Rome, The Other Half-Rome, and Tertium Quid, for example) are almost entirely the poet's own creations. Not only has Browning created these new minor figures, but he has also significantly changed and shaped the principal original characters. The Guido, Pompilia, and Caponsacchi of Browning's poem are different people from those described in the "Old Yellow Book".⁵⁴ Edward Dowden has these comments: "It is especially the characters of the actors in these tragic events that Browning has created or refashioned and developed."⁵⁵ Quoting A.K. Cook, William Devane in his Browning Handbook remarks:

In considering the differences between the words of Pompilia and Caponsacchi as we have them in the Old Yellow Book and in the poem, he [Cook] greatly strengthens the conception of Browning's creativeness, and finds that the poet chose and altered his

⁵³ The English Novel, p. xviii.

⁵⁴ The Old Yellow Book was a piece of parchment giving a contemporary account of the trial. Browning picked up the old document at a bookstall in Florence in June 1860.

⁵⁵ The Ring and the Book, p. xi.

originals with consummate skill ... he concludes that "the charm and nobility of the finely contrasted characters of the hero and the heroine were entirely his [Browning's] creation."⁵⁶

And he says that, "The Guido of Book XI is ... the poet's own amazing creation, made out of what the poet imagined his Guido would have said and done as his doom approached."⁵⁷

In adopting real historical figures as the chief characters for The Ring and the Book, but then reshaping them to his own designs, Browning has followed the practice of countless other novelists, both before and after his own day.

The atmosphere of realism, the "illusion of reality" that novelists value so highly, prevails throughout the whole of The Ring and the Book. Henry James says that the poem envelopes us in the peculiar atmosphere of "Old Florence":

The Old Florence of late spring closes round us; the hand of Italy is at once, with the recital of the old-world letter of Piazza San Lorenzo, with that of the great glare and of the great shadow-masses, heavy upon us, heavy with that strange weight, that mixed pressure, which is somehow, to our imagination, at once a caress and a menace. 58

⁵⁶ A Browning Handbook, p. 340.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 336.

⁵⁸ Notes on Novelists, p. 401.

For James the atmosphere of The Ring and the Book is so realistic that he lives through it all, not as a mere spectator, but in the manner of a participant:

... by the time I am settled with Pompilia at Arezzo I have lived into all the conditions. They press upon me close, those wonderful dreadful beautiful particulars of the Italy of the eve of the eighteenth century. 59

I see the Arezzo life and the Arezzo crisis with every "i" dotted and every circumstance presented; and when Guido takes his wife ... to the theatre - the theatre of old Arezzo: share with me the tattered vision and inhale the musty air! - I am well in range of Pompilia, the tragically exquisite, in her box, with her husband not there for an hour but posted elsewhere; I look at her in fact over Caponsacchi's shoulder and that of his brother-canon Conti, while this light character ... manages to toss into her lap ... "a papertwist of comfits". 60

Browning seems to make his characters real and living people. The monologue that each speaks is both appropriate and character-revealing. Take Caponsacchi, for example. His monologue to the court not only reveals his character vividly, it displays his passions and his agitated state of mind and soul. At the beginning of his speech he is shocked and grief-stricken:

59 Notes on Novelists, p. 402.

60 Ibid., p. 408-9.

Answer you sirs? Do I understand aright?
 Have patience? In this sudden smoke from hell -
 So things disguise themselves - I cannot see
 My own hand held thus broad before my face
 And know it again. Answer you?

And realizing that his beloved Pompilia is dying, he pours
 out his anguish before the judges:

... But she -
 The glory of life, the beauty of the world,
 The splendor of heaven ... well, sirs, does no
 one move?
 Do I speak ambiguously? The glory, I say,
 And the beauty, I say, and splendor, still say I,
 Who, priest and trained to live my whole life long
 On beauty and splendor, solely at their source,
 God - have thus recognized my food in her,
 You tell me, that's fast dying while we talk,
 Pompilia! How does lenity to me
 Remit one death-bed pang to her?

These are words of passion, spoken with the ardor of fierce
 love, a love so intense that only hyperbolic language - "the
 beauty of the world", "the splendor of heaven" - can give it
 adequate expression. The passion comes through to the
 reader. Both the speaker and his words seem real and vivid.

Little touches of human interest contribute to the
 "illusion of reality" in The Ring and the Book. In the
 midst of dry, lifeless legal argument we are reminded that
 little Cinone Archangelis is having a birthday feast, and
 that he will dine on fried liver and fennel. Again, in the
 theatre at Arezzo, when Caponsacchi first sees the lovely

young Pompilia, his fellow priest, Canon Conti, mischievously tosses a papertwist of candy in the lady's lap, and then, boy-like, hides behind Caponsacchi to let him take the blame. Seemingly insignificant incidents such as these serve to remind us that we are dealing with real and living people.

It is generally agreed, as I have shown in the first chapter, that a good novel must have unity. In considering whether The Ring and the Book is a novel, it is very important to determine if the poem has the degree of unity expected in a novel.

There are several reasons for claiming that The Ring and the Book does have unity, and is not just a string of dramatic monologues. First, the whole poem has a single purpose (theme, if you like), and each of the monologues contributes towards the fulfilment of that purpose. The purpose of this poem, it seems, is to find the answer to the question: "What is the truth?". The seventeenth century Roman court must make an important decision in a murder case. Pompilia, the young wife, lies dying; her parents are already dead, slain by Guido, the old nobleman husband. Is he guilty of murder? Or was he justified in killing an adulterous wife who deserted him and ruined his good name? What is the truth? Each of the speakers presents his own version of the truth, the truth as he sees it, the truth coloured (and in all probability distorted) by personal passion and personal

motive. The whole truth, the real truth, cannot be ascertained until everyone has been heard. The complete truth is a composite made up of the fragments of truth contributed by each speaker. Every monologue, therefore, is necessary to the whole poem.

Second, the central situation in the poem - the murder and the trial - affects, in one way or another, every person in the poem. Each, as Hugh Walker points out, in some way influences the other:

The Ring and the Book, then, is a group of dramatic monologues closely bound together. All the speakers have been concerned in the same events, and they necessarily throw light upon one another. Thus Caponsacchi owes to Pompilia what is virtually a new birth, and in learning to understand her we are helped to understand him. 61

Third, the principal characters - Guido, Pompilia, Caponsacchi - dominate the whole poem. We do not feel the force of these three only in the monologues in which they speak: we feel their presence in every part of this novel. Every speaker is concerned with these three and with what they did. In every monologue Caponsacchi rescues Pompilia and Guido pursues and kills, and people talk and talk and talk.

A critic cited by William Devane sees the unity of The Ring and the Book as psychological and organic:

61 The Literature of the Victorian Era, p. 430.

R.B. McElderry Jr. shows with what great care and organizing power Browning avoided repetition in his poem, and he thinks the poet must have worked from sketches and plans. For example, the various books of the poem are analyzed and charted to show how the emphasis falls upon one major episode or another of the story, such as the marriage, the flight, the murder, and the trial, etc., appropriate to the time of the monologue and the character of the speaker. Professor McElderry concludes that The Ring and the Book has psychological and organic rather than rational unity and is a gigantic series of insights and intuitions, with, however, great ingenuity in the structure. 62

The Ring and the Book is not composed of so many independent, unrelated dramatic monologues. Each monologue presents one aspect of the total situation. The whole twelve books are inter-related. There is, therefore, a homogeneity about the poem: there is unity.

The Ring and the Book, then, seems to have most of the chief characteristics of the novel: a kind of situation appropriate to the novel, characters typical of the novel, unity, the "illusion of reality". And there are two further reasons for suggesting that the poem is a verse-novel, two reasons that, apparently, most commentators have overlooked. First, there is the fact that Browning was certainly quite familiar with an alleged verse-novel. In 1856 Mrs. Browning published her long poem Aurora Leigh, and she herself called this poem a novel in verse. Without doubt, Browning had read Aurora Leigh thoroughly and the idea of a novel written

in verse must have become familiar to him. It was only four years later, in 1860, that he began to work on The Ring and the Book. It seems reasonable to suggest that his wife's Aurora Leigh, an avowed verse-novel, might well have served (subconsciously or otherwise) as a precedent for The Ring and the Book. And, second, we know that Browning considered the old Roman murder case as appropriate material for a novel, because, as both Edward Dowden⁶³ and William Devane⁶⁴ point out, he offered the story, as early as the winter of 1860, to his friend Miss Ogle as the subject for a novel.

Twentieth century critical opinion tends to support Henry James' contention that The Ring and the Book is a novel. L.G. Salingar, for example, says:

... as Henry James declared, The Ring and the Book has the elements of an excellent novel; intricate in itself, the case ramifies by way of partial evidence, pleadings, gossip, and judgment, until a whole society is drawn in; there are anticipations of the method James himself was to use in the way one subjective

⁶³ The Ring and the Book, p. vii.

⁶⁴ A Browning Handbook, p. 320.

version of the affair cancels or modifies another. And Browning is very skilful in varying the run of his blank verse to suit the speaker and the occasion. 65

Samuel Chew, in a footnote, sums up the "modern" view of The Ring and the Book as a novel:

The "modern" view of the poem discounts the religious and ethical aspects and finds interest in the "novel" element - the complications, the suspense, the entanglements of motive, the conflicts of testimony, the bustle and excitement. 66

Because I find in The Ring and the Book most of the essential elements of the novel as I described them earlier, I conclude that this poem is indeed a verse-novel, a Victorian verse-novel.

65 From Dickens to Hardy, p. 254.

66 The Nineteenth Century and After (1789-1939), A Literary History of England, ed. Albert C. Baugh (New York, 1948), VI, 1403.

CHAPTER III

THE VERSE-NOVEL AND THE VERSE-ROMANCE

It should now be possible, following the guidelines I have established, to determine whether a poem is a verse-novel or an epic. The problem of distinguishing between the verse-novel and the verse-romance, however, still remains.¹ In this chapter I shall try to ascertain the distinctive differences between these two forms. This done, I shall examine two Victorian long narrative poems; the first is usually called a romance, the second both a novel and a romance.

¹ Critics disagree whether several Victorian long narrative poems are verse-novels or verse-romances. Hugh Walker, for example, calls Lord Lytton's (Owen Meredith) Lucile a verse-romance, while George Sampson and others refer to it as a verse-novel. Again, Walker speaks of Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh as "the ambitious metrical romance of Aurora Leigh", though most commentators (including Mrs. Browning herself) call it a verse-novel.

I - The Romance: A Narrative of Love?

For several reasons it is especially difficult to distinguish between the verse-novel and the verse-romance.² One of the chief reasons is that nowadays the terms "romance" and "romantic" are almost exclusively associated with love and love relations between the sexes. As a result, any long narrative concerned with a love story is now usually referred to as a "romance".

Is the romance a genre exclusively concerned with love stories? A brief review of the history of the English romance may provide at least a partial answer.

During the Middle Ages the romance flourished as never before (and as never since). The medieval romance was primarily an adventure story told in verse, even though some of the most famous love stories of all time - those of Tristan and Iseult, Lancelot and Guinevere, and Floris and Blancheflour - were associated with this genre. Though there were a few romances in which the love story was the chief concern (these were mainly French romances, as Albert C.

² The problem of distinguishing the romance from the novel also applies to nineteenth century prose fiction. Sir Walter Scott's Ivanhoe, Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island, for example, have, on occasion, been called both romances and novels.

Baugh points out³), usually the love interest was a secondary one, subsidiary to action and adventure:

Except for a few romances, in which the love story is the main feature, love, if it enters into the narrative at all, is either subordinated to the adventure (Erec, Yvain), or is incidental, as when a Saracen princess conceives a desperate passion for the hero (Bevis of Hampton), or is used as a motivating force, an excuse for the adventures of the hero (Guy of Warwick).⁴

"Medieval romances are stories of adventure" says Dorothy Everett.⁵ "The basic material is knightly activity and adventure", states Albert C. Baugh, "and we may best put the emphasis in the right place if we define the medieval romance as a story of adventure - fictitious and frequently marvellous or supernatural - in verse or prose".⁶

After medieval times, especially after the invention of the printing press, prose replaced verse as the chief language of the romance. The essential characteristics of the

p. 173. ³ A Literary History of England (New York, 1948),

⁴ Ibid., p. 173.

p. 3. ⁵ Essays of Middle English Literature (Oxford, 1955),

⁶ A Literary History of England, p. 173.

genre, however, remained very much the same. The romances of the sixteenth century, really the old romances of chivalry in a pastoral setting, as George Sampson describes them,⁷ were still just as much concerned with an idyllic kind of setting and a series of chivalric adventures as with a love story. Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia, with its "ideal scenes and sentiments ... pastoral idealism",⁸ and Thomas Lodge's Rosalynde are representative.

Love was important in the seventeenth century romance, but it was certainly not its exclusive theme. Action and adventure, as their epithet suggests, were concomitants with love in the so-called "heroic" romances of the period.⁹ Later romances such as Mrs. Aphra Behn's Orinocco were not simply love stories either.

The term "romance" in the eighteenth century designated, Logan Pearsall Smith states, "false and fictitious beings and feelings, without real existence in fact or human

⁷ The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature, p. 162.

⁸ Ibid., p. 162.

⁹ Seventeenth century English romances were modelled chiefly on French romance by D'Urfe, Gomberville, and Mlle de Scudery. The main theme of these, according to George Sampson (The Concise Cambridge, p. 402), was "heroic love in large dimensions".

nature".¹⁰ The romance in that period was mainly on account of the chimerical, the ridiculous, the unnatural, and the bombastic. William Beckford's extraordinary tale of Vathek is perhaps typical.

Rehabilitated by the Romantic Movement, the romance flourished again in both prose and verse during much of the nineteenth century. Nineteenth century romance was chiefly an account of the strange, the far-away, and the long-ago, usually with more stress on adventure and derring-do than upon love. In prose Sir Walter Scott's Ivanhoe is perhaps typical of early nineteenth century romance, while "Anthony Hope" Hawkins' The Prisoner of Zenda and Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island are typical of the late nineteenth century. In verse The Ancient Mariner, The Eve of St. Agnes, The Giaour, and The Blessed Damozel are probably representative. At the end of the century the romance was still not exclusively a story of love.

Traditionally, then, the romance was never entirely a love story. The recent tendency, therefore, to regard romance as "chiefly the passion of love"¹¹ is not historically

¹⁰ Words and Idioms (London, 1925), p. 70-71.

¹¹ Edith Hamilton, as cited in Perspectives on Epic ed. Candelaria and Strange (Boston, 1965), p. 26.

valid.

II - The Romance: "Experience Liberated"

Those who now consider love and romance as virtually synonymous apparently assume that love itself is inherently romantic. "Romance", says Dorothy Everett, "is not inherent in any kind of subject matter, nor is it found by nature in any literary form".¹² It is all in the manner of treatment she concludes. The romance is indeed a genre which treats its materials - characters, story, and setting - in a special manner, and that manner is peculiar to it and distinct from that of the novel.

Unlike the usually variegated and variable characters of the novel, the chief figures of the romance tend to be rather fixed types: the gallant hero, the blackguard villain, etc. Seldom does the romance attempt to be psychological, or to bring out all the varying shades of character that we generally find in the novel. "The half-tones of ordinary human nature are not for the romance writers", says Dorothy Everett; "every man is either a hero and a good man, or a villain", she concludes.¹³

¹² Essays on Middle English Literature, p. 14.

¹³ Ibid., p. 9.

One reason characters in the romance are usually inferior to those in the novel is that the romance is chiefly interested, not in the people it presents, but in the story it tells. W. Macneile Dixon says that the romance "provokes curiosity about mere happenings".¹⁴ The writer of romance concentrates on, and makes the most of, what is happening in his story: surprise, wonder, emotional excitement, are his stock-in-trade. The reader is titillated by a series of exciting incidents that virtually drag him on from one exciting climax to the next.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the novel and the romance is the manner in which each handles its story. The novel, aiming at a representation of real life, will, in all probability, tell a story in which, in the words of Sir Walter Scott, "events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events".¹⁵ The romance, however, is much more interested in the unusual than in the everyday. Its interest, according to Sir Walter Scott, "turns upon the

¹⁴ English Epic and Heroic Poetry, p. 100.

¹⁵ Essay on Romance (1824); reprinted in Miscellaneous Prose Works (1882), vol. VI. As cited in Novelists on the Novel by Miriam Allott, p. 49.

uncommon and the marvellous".¹⁶

A special interest in the uncommon, the marvellous, the strange, the mysterious, the remote - this, in the opinion of many commentators, is the most distinctive characteristic of the romance. Clare Reeve, for example, says that "The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things".¹⁷ Sir Walter Scott, as I noted above, states that romance is interested in the marvellous and the uncommon. W.P. Ker suggests that "Romance means nothing if it does not convey some notion of mystery and fantasy".¹⁸ W. Macneile Dixon says that, "... it [the romance] makes the introduction of surprising unfamiliar things its chief end."¹⁹ And Henry James says that the romance deals with life as it might be lived if it were freed from the usual conventions of everyday existence:

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The Progress of Romance (1785), vol. I, Evening vii.

¹⁸ Epic and Romance, p. 4.

¹⁹ English Epic and Heroic Poetry, p. 100.

The only general attribute of projected romance that I can see, the only one that fits all cases, is the fact of the kind of experience with which it deals - experience liberated, so to speak, experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it, and, if we so wish to put the matter, drag upon it, and operating in a medium which relieves it, in a particular interest, of the inconvenience of a related, a measurable state, a state subject to all our vulgar communities. 20

The romance deals with "experience liberated" ... from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it" - this is probably one of the best descriptions of the romance that we are likely to find. This description implies the essential quality of the romance: its apparent immunity to the laws of probability that usually govern the novel. The romance can depict, and often does depict, "what never happened nor is likely to happen".²¹

If we accept Henry James' description of the romance as "experience liberated ... from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it", then we conclude that an essential characteristic of the romance is that it is unrealistic, unlike the usual conditions of life as we know it here and now, or as it was really known in the past, for that matter. The romance often idealizes experience;

²⁰ Preface to The American (1877); first printed in the New York edition of the Novels and Stories (1907-17). As cited in Novelists on the Novel, p. 56.

²¹ Clara Reeve, The Progress of Romance, vol. I.

usually removes it from the realm of the concrete and the actual. The world of Greek romance was not the realm of reality that the Greeks knew. The world of medieval romance, the environment of King Arthur and Sir Gawain, was far different from the real medieval world too. The romance creates what is essentially a dream world "relieved", as Henry James said, "of the inconvenience of a related, a measurable state, a state subject to all our vulgar communities". The romance tends to lift the reader out of reality, to transport him into its dream world, and there to enchant, delight, horrify, and thrill him with the kind of situations, incidents, and experiences that, in all probability, he cannot find in real life. The romance acts as a kind of anodyne.

Enjoying a romance, the reader is usually conscious of the fact that he is in a dream world, that all this is not reality. Involved in a good novel, his reactions are probably quite different. Unlike the romance, the novel seriously intends to portray real life: the kind of situation, incidents, and characters that the reader will recognize and accept "in terms of his own experience". The novel will not let the reader forget that "this is real", "this is life as I see it". The novel proposes to do something more than amuse and entertain: it presents its particular "reading of life" as a unique contribution towards

general edification.

So that it may more readily escape the "inconvenience" of a related ... measurable state", the romance will often take as its setting some time and place remote from the present (either in the past, or in the future). It may be argued that a novel may also be set in the remote time or place. The novel, however, will probably treat its setting quite differently from the way a romance would. The novel will take its far-away-and-long-ago setting and render it familiar to its reader, so that it may feel here-and-now and real to him. The romance would utilize the atmosphere of "once upon a time in a far country" to liberate the reader from his "usual conditions", his "measurable state", and the "vulgar communities" to which he is usually subjected.

Thus far, then, we have three important differences between the romance and the novel:

First, the romance provides mere entertainment, the novel a "serious criticism of life".

Second, the romance is chiefly interested in an exciting story, the novel in character.

Third, the romance is not bound to observe the laws of probability that usually govern the novel. It utilizes its freedom from these laws to present persons, incidents, and situations that are strange, extraordinary, or supernatural. The novel, on the contrary, usually tries to present people

and situations that are lifelike, credible, and probable. Whenever the novel does present the unusual and the extraordinary (as it does in a novel such as Wuthering Heights, for example), it usually attempts to make the uncommon seem credible and the extraordinary seem realistic.

Although we recognize these differences, it is still sometimes difficult to distinguish between a romance and a novel. One reason for the difficulty is that there are varying degrees of romance. At one extreme there is the fairytale, Cinderella type of romance in which magic and the supernatural prevail, and where very little obvious attempt is made to comply with the laws of probability. There is little danger of mistaking the extremely romantic type of narrative for a novel, since there are limits, as Richard Cumberland, the eighteenth century novelist, points out, to how fanciful a novelist may be:

How far shall we go then for our reader's amusement.... There is undoubtedly a land mark in the fields of fancy, sunt certi denique fines, but it requires a nice discernment to find them out and a cautious temper not to step beyond them. 22

And at the other extreme there is the realistic type of romance where there is very little, or none at all, of the faerie and the magic element. Some romances, indeed, are so

²² Henry (1795), Book the Fourth, Chap. 1, as cited in Novelists on the Novel by Miriam Allott.

realistic that they border on the novel, and so we have such types as the historical romance (Scott's Ivanhoe), and the romance of adventure (Stevenson's Treasure Island).

Then, again, the novel is most certainly not a "pure" form. "There is", said George Saintsbury, "at least the suggestion and possibility of romance in every novel".²³ There are, therefore, varying degrees of romance in the novel itself. While the novel aims at realism, at a representation of real life, if it hopes to attract and hold the reader it must not make its representation too common, too dull and insipid. After all, real life sometimes has its magic, its wonder, and its strangeness: in short, its romance. The problem of the novel, then, as a novelist such as Thomas Hardy sees it, is to include elements of romance in the novel without endangering probability:

A story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling. We tale-tellers are all Ancient Mariners, and none of us is warranted in stopping Wedding Guests (in other words, the hurrying public) unless he has something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experiences of every average man and woman. ²⁴

. . . .

²³ The English Novel, p. 8.

²⁴ Notebook entry (Feb. 23, 1893) from The Later Years of Thomas Hardy, 1892-1928 (1928), chap. ii.

... a work of fiction should be a precise transcript of ordinary life: but, the uncommon would be absent and the interest lost, hence, the writer's problem is, how to strike the balance between the uncommon and the ordinary so as on the one hand to give interest, on the other to give reality. 25

The novelist does not always "strike the balance between the uncommon and the ordinary" and the result is a romantic novel such as The Mysteries of Udolpho or Wuthering Heights. In such a novel, mystery, strangeness, the supernatural are emphasized to such a degree that the atmosphere of realism usually associated with the novel is largely dissipated.

Although there are realistic romances and romantic novels, we should now be able to distinguish between a romance and a novel - bearing in mind the three important points of difference that I previously noted: the serious intentions of the novel (to present real life, to give a criticism of life, etc.), the novel's deep interest in character, and the tendency of the romance as distinct from the novel to give us the extraordinary: "experience liberated".

²⁵ Notebook entry (July 1881) from The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1891 (1928), Chap. xi.

III - An Examination of a Verse-romance and a Verse-novel

To determine whether the points of difference I just noted will help distinguish a verse-novel from a verse-romance, I shall now examine two Victorian long narrative poems: William Morris' The Life and Death of Jason, which critics generally agree is a verse-romance, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh, a poem critics have called both a verse-novel and a verse-romance.

The story told in The Life and Death of Jason is characteristic of the romance:

Jason, the son of Aeson, the rightful king of Iolchos, having reached manhood, sets out to wrest his father's kingdom from his uncle, the wicked king Pelias. The wily Pelias, fearing the young man, promises to yield up the kingdom if Jason performs a certain great heroic feat for him. Jason gathers a group of heroes and sets out by ship for Colchis to perform the deed. Aided by Medea, the beautiful daughter of the king of Colchis, he accomplishes his mission and returns to Iolchos, taking Medea with him. Jason and Medea live happily together for a time, until he becomes enamoured of Glaucus, the daughter of the king of Corinth. Medea, becoming jealous of the two, arranges the death of Glaucus. Jason dies soon afterward.

The basic situation here - the young prince setting out to avenge a wronged father, performing a superhuman task, and winning a beautiful lady - is typical of the romance. The story is saturated with the supernatural: Jason is reared by a centaur; the goddess Juno assists the hero in his

undertaking; the prize Jason seeks at Colchis is the Golden Fleece of a wonderful flying ram, and so on.

Some portions of the story, though, particularly those near the end of the poem, are not entirely inappropriate for a novel. In the romance the hero, having performed his mighty deed, and having won his fair lady, usually lives happily ever afterward. Jason and Medea, with their children, live happily only until he becomes enamoured of Glauce: then we have the "other woman" theme so familiar in many novels. As in a realistic novel, the wronged common-law wife (Medea) takes her revenge with disastrous results. Despite this resemblance in theme, however, Morris does not treat his subject as a novelist would, for Medea is an enchantress and the various feats of magic dispell the atmosphere of realism. The aura of the supernatural prevails.

The characters, too, in Jason are sometimes like those of a novel. The wily Pelias, for example, when he is faced with disaster at the hands of Jason and the brother he has so grievously wronged, behaves realistically. First he appeases his brother (promising to restore his throne). Then he rapidly appraises the character of the youthful Jason, and playing on the young man's thirst for adventure and fame, bends him to his will. Employing much practical psychology, Pelias tricks Jason into attempting a seemingly impossible task - the recovery of the Golden Fleece from

Colchis - a mission in which he is almost sure to lose his life. But Pelias is still apprehensive, and his reaction is typically human: he loses his appetite and his taste for drink:

But Pelias gazed with heedful eyes at him,
Nor drank the wine that well-nigh touched
the brim of his gold cup.

Medea, at one point at least, behaves like a character in a novel. Throughout much of the poem she is, as A. Clutton-Brock, biographer of William Morris, points out, nothing more than a "wonderful enchantress".²⁶ When she hears that Jason is unfaithful to her, however, she acts as most ordinary women would: a "fierce, tormenting fire consumed her", the fire of acute jealousy. Then, having received his letter of dismissal, she stands dumb with human grief:

...she was wrapped in uttermost despair,
And motionless within the chamber fair
She stood, as one struck dead and past all thought.

As she stands there the cries of her children reach her ears. For a while she is not the enchantress, she is a human mother, and she expresses a mother's love and emotions: sorrow at the thought that her little ones will soon be in the grave, bitter disappointment at the thought of all the joys and

²⁶ William Morris, His Work and Influence, Home University Library of Modern Knowledge ed., Herbert Fisher et al (New York, undated), p. 91.

experiences they might have shared, and remorse at the thought of their traitorous father. Then she kills her children and goes back to being a kind of witch.

Though for short periods we may feel that the characters in Jason are real and human, we never really forget for long that Jason is a hero, a kind of superhuman figure, "greater than other men". The poem is chiefly concerned with the wonderful feats Jason performs, seldom with the way he thinks, or how he feels about things, as the novel probably would. Medea, too, except in the one instance, is the enchantress rather than the human being. True to its type, this romance is interested in incident and adventure rather than character.

The romantic atmosphere of The Life and Death of Jason is intensified by the fact that the story is set in ancient times in a faraway land. In contrast to Jason, Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh is set in contemporary England, France, and Italy.

While most critics agree with Mrs. Browning that her poem is a verse-novel, Hugh Walker speaks of it as: "the ambitious metrical romance of Aurora Leigh".

When he refers to Aurora Leigh as a romance Hugh Walker must be applying the term in the modern sense i.e. "Romance means chiefly the passions of love". While the love story is of considerable importance in Aurora Leigh, this

alone (as I concluded earlier) does not necessarily make the poem a verse-romance. To declare the poem a romance we must see in it other elements of the genre besides love interest.

If we adhere to our previous description of the romance as a narrative greatly concerned with the strange and the wonderful, then the story told in Aurora Leigh is novelistic rather than romantic:

Aurora Leigh, an orphan child born in Italy, is brought to England after the death of her English father and is reared and educated by a prim old spinster aunt. The aunt tries to influence Aurora to marry her cousin Romney Leigh, a young man with an obsession for social reform. They disagree, however, over Aurora's devotion to poetry, and she refuses to marry him. The aunt dies, leaving Aurora a small legacy. Refusing Romney's offer of financial help, she moves to London and becomes an author. Romney proceeds with his radical reform work among the lower classes.

Eventually Romney proposes to marry Marian Erle, a girl of the slums, and a strange mixture of London society types and slum dwellers gather at the church to witness the wedding. Lady Waldemar, an acquaintance of Aurora who loves Romney, spirits Marian away, however, and spoils the marriage plan.

A few months later Aurora is in Paris, and she comes upon Marian, a broken figure. After the girl had been tricked out of marrying Romney she was sent to France by a servant of Lady Waldemar's as material intended for a brothel. Subsequently drugged and raped, she escaped from the brothel and wandered about the countryside till the birth of her child.

Aurora takes Marian with her to Florence. There Romney eventually comes and finds them. He offers to marry the unfortunate Marian, but she refuses him, having now become entirely engrossed in her child. Romney tells Aurora that his social reforms have entirely failed; that his proteges have turned upon him and burned his mansion; and that he is a changed man and now agrees with her philosophies. Aurora admits that she too was perhaps extreme. They agree

that they need each other (especially as he is now blind) and they look ahead to a new and better life together.

Though this story may be "rather wild and melodramatic", as Osbert Burdett suggests, it has no elements of the marvellous or the supernatural as does Morris' Jason or Tennyson's The Lady of Shalott. Though the reader may sometimes feel that a particular situation or incident is perhaps unlikely, the laws of probability are seldom deliberately broken. The overall impression is that "this is real life", "these are real people": this is the kind of impression one gets from the novel, not from the romance.

Some critics disagree whether the characters in Aurora Leigh are romantic or novelistic. Osbert Burdett implies that they are romantic ideals:

... the writer [Mrs. Browning] was less interested in the truth of her characters than in the virtue or weakness that they display ... She made an honest attempt to be absolutely modern, and the result was indeed a faithful picture of the romantic ideals of her age and her type, though not of the age itself or of actual human nature. 27

Virginia Woolf, however, maintains that Aurora is a typical young Victorian woman and Romney a Victorian gentleman:

²⁷ The Brownings, p. 253.

... if she [Mrs. Browning] meant ... to give us the sense of life in general, of people who are undoubtedly Victorian in substance wrestling with problems which are unmistakably Victorian in nature ... she succeeded. Aurora Leigh with her passionate interest in social questions, her ambitions as an artist, her disabilities as a woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom, is the true daughter of her age. Romney too, with his phalanstery and his earnest morality, is no less certainly a mid-Victorian gentleman who has thought about the social question and been converted, unhappily as it turned out, to the doctrines of Fourier. 28

Perhaps Mrs. Browning did consider Aurora as some sort of romantic ideal. Mrs. Woolf suggests that she was planning to write her novel-poem when she first met Robert Browning. Until she married Robert, Mrs. Browning lived a singularly confined life. It does not seem illogical to suggest that she perhaps regarded Aurora as Elizabeth Barrett emancipated: free, active, independent, a woman of the world, a woman experiencing a fuller life than she herself could possibly hope to enjoy. There are, after all, many suggestions of autobiography in Aurora Leigh: both Mrs. Browning and her Aurora, for example, are poets; both express similar philosophies of art and life. Virginia Woolf says that Mrs. Browning expresses herself through Aurora:

²⁸ "Aurora Leigh", The Yale Review, vol. XX (June 1931), p. 688.

Through the voice of Aurora, the character, the circumstances, the idiosyncrasies of Elizabeth Barrett Browning ring in our ears. Mrs. Browning could no more conceal herself than she could control herself Again and again in the pages we read, Aurora the fictitious seems to be throwing light upon Elizabeth the actual. 29

Even if Aurora is Mrs. Browning's ideal woman, the romantic expression of herself as she would like to be, she is still a realistic character. Aurora seems real to us because her creator reveals so many facets of her personality that we understand her thoroughly, and we know her very well. Let us observe some of Aurora's salient characteristics as they are brought out in the poem: first, her strong spirit of independence. In these lines she hurls defiance at the man who would presume to have her on terms of less than absolute equality:

... for me,
 Perhaps I am not worthy, as you say,
 Of work like this; perhaps a woman's soul
 Aspires, and not creates; yet we aspire,
 And yet I'll try out your perhapses, sir,
 And if I fail ... why, burn me up my
 Straw
 Like other false works - I'll not ask for grace;
 Your scorn is better, cousin Romney.

And then Aurora's essential femininity. In London, though she experiences success as a poet, she is lonely as a woman:

²⁹ The Yale Review, vol. XX (June 1931), p. 681.

"My Father!" thou has knowledge, only thou,
 How dreary 'tis for women to sit still,
 On winter nights by solitary fires,
 And hear the nations praising them far off,
 Too far! Ay, praising our quick sense of love,
 Our very heart of passionate womanhood,
 Which could not beat so in the verse without
 Being present also in the unkissed lips
 And eyes undried because there's none to ask
 The reason they grew moist.

And Aurora's kindliness, quick sympathy, and deep pity. In these lines she offers sisterly love to poor Marian Erle:

My sister Marian, can I hurt thee, dear?
 Then why distrust me? Never tremble so.
 Come with me rather where we'll talk and live,
 And none shall vex us. I've a home for you
 And me and no one else.

Aurora has her faults and weaknesses too. When she finds the wretched Marian and discovers that she has a child, without waiting to hear the truth, she cannot, according to Osbert Burdett, "restrain a stream of priggish remarks". When she does learn the truth she is ashamed of herself. Again, when the blinded and humbled Romney comes to her in Florence she jumps to the conclusion that he is married to Lady Waldemar, and so she flares into anger when he intimates that he still loves her. Once again she shortly regrets her rashness.

Mrs. Browning shows us Aurora's thoughts on life and love, on men and women, and on art. In the manner of the novel, Aurora reveals her own attitudes and philosophies

in her conversations, in her soliloquies, and in her musings. We see how Aurora reacts to other people; how she influences others, and how she is in turn influenced by them. We see her react to the various situations she encounters. In short, we see Aurora live in Mrs. Browning's novel-poem.

Romney, Lady Waldemar, and the spinster aunt are also realistic characters appropriate to the novel. To say that they are realistic is not the same as saying that they are great characters, but rather that they are people we would accept as "recognizable in terms of our own experience".

Marian Erle is the only important character in Aurora Leigh that may be termed unreal. Again and again this angel from the slums strains our credulity. Brought up in the most appalling conditions, she still becomes a good, pure woman - instinctively it seems. As a mere child she learned of God just by gazing at the sky. Marian had "no book learning ... was ignorant of authors", according to Aurora, yet she was able to express herself in poetic outbursts every once in a while. Marian wronged is incredibly sweet and forgiving. Perhaps Mrs. Browning intended Marian as some kind of romantic ideal.³⁰

³⁰ Actually, Marian is an unrealistic character because Mrs. Browning used her as a straw figure to illustrate the point that unwed mothers were not necessarily evil and immoral creatures.

In spite of the fact that she may sometimes seem unreal, Marian is a character more novelistic than romantic. In Morris' The Life and Death of Jason our attention is focused on what Medea does, seldom on what she thinks or feels. She seems to really live at only one or two points in the poem. Mrs. Browning, on the other hand, emphasizes Marian's emotions and reactions. The paradox about Marian is that though we are sometimes incredulous about her, yet we seem to understand her, and we know her very well. We feel that though Marian is a very unusual person, she is, nonetheless, a person. Medea only occasionally seems like a person. Medea is of the romance where character gives place to story; Marian is of the novel where story usually gives place to character.

The atmosphere of Aurora Leigh feels different from that of Jason. Jason, it seems, is a story told to the reader, chiefly to entertain him. The reader is aware, or ought to be aware, that in this story he is escaping from reality, lifted out of the real world naturally, almost automatically, by the far-away-and-long-ago setting, the largely superhuman characters, and the super-heroic story. Vicariously he lives for a period a kind of superhuman existence. This romance takes us to "enchanted ground" and provides fascinating entertainment, but it lacks that weightiness and seriousness of purpose that we usually

associate with the novel.

Aurora Leigh tells a story too, but the reader has a greater sense of involvement in the story. This is partly so because the setting is comparatively recent and familiar, the characters resemble real people, and the story is possible, even probable. Then, again, the people in this poem are involved in problems and situations that are widely known, generally familiar ones: the complexities of love, social injustices, differences of opinion, conflicting philosophies. The reader does not escape from life in Aurora Leigh; vicariously he comes to grips with it. The poem, as Virginia Woolf said, gives "the sense of life in general", and that, essentially, is what we expect of the novel.

Now that I have examined the verse-novel in relation to the epic and the verse-romance, I still have no precise definition of the form. I have discovered, however, that though the three are in many ways similar, two important characteristics of the verse-novel set it apart, and these are the two that I listed as distinctly and uniquely novelistic in Chapter I:

First, the verse-novel is greatly concerned with character. "When writing a novel", says Ernest Hemmingway, "a writer should create living people.... If a writer can make people live there may be no great characters in his book, but it is

possible that his book will remain as a whole; as an entity; as a novel"³¹

Second, the verse-novel gives "the sense of life", the awareness of life, the illusion that "this is real". This is so because the novelist usually attempts to portray the kind of people and conditions that may seem real to us "in terms of our own experience".

The verse-novel differs from the prose novel in that its language is poetry, from the epic in that its characters are representative human beings rather than superhuman heroes, and from the verse-romance in that its situations and incidents are lifelike and familiar rather than strange and extraordinary. With its own particular characteristics, then, the verse-novel is obviously a distinct and definite narrative genre.

³¹ Death in the Afternoon, p. 191.

CHAPTER IV

THE VERSE-NOVEL IN THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

Having determined the distinguishing characteristics of the genre, and developed a definition, I now have the criteria to ascertain whether any long narrative poem is a novel in verse. To utilize my definition, therefore, I shall now examine other poems of the Victorian Period that critics have called verse-novels, and some shorter works that have been mentioned as verse-novelettes.

I - The Verse-novels of Owen Meredith

Owen Meredith wrote two long narrative poems that have been called verse-novels: Lucile¹ and Glenaveril.² Lucile tells the story of three nineteenth century aristocrats: Lord Vargrave, an Englishman, Duke Luvois, a Frenchman, and the Comtess de Nevers (Lucile), involved in the stock love triangle. As the story opens Lord Vargrave, about to be married to Mathilda Darcy, a beautiful, wealthy, young girl, hears from an old flame, Lucile. To be certain

¹ Called a verse-novel by Hugh Walker in The Literature of the Victorian Era (Cambridge, 1921), p. 602.

² Ibid.

that his former affections are really dead, Vargrave goes to see Lucile and promptly falls in love with her again. Complications arise, many of them the creations of Duke Luvois, his deadly rival. Frustrated in his efforts to win Lucile, Vargrave finally returns to England and marries Mathilda.

On a later trip to the continent with his wife, Vargrave again meets Lucile and Duke Luvois. Lucile still fascinates him, and she still loves him too, but again the Duke ruins their affectionate relationship. Subsequently, Vargrave makes a final break with his beloved Lucile.

Time goes by and eventually Vargrave's son, having become a young man in the meantime, replaces his father as the male protagonist. The youth falls in love with the beautiful niece of his father's old nemesis, Duke Luvois. As with the father, so with the son, Luvois is the chief stumbling block in the path of true romance, for the Duke loves his niece as a daughter and is unwilling to bestow her upon Vargrave's offspring. Lucile, now an aging nun, uses her influence with Luvois, and the duke submits. True love is consummated in the second generation.

Except for the final episode involving Vargrave's son, an episode seemingly contrived to effect a happy ending, the story told in Lucile is realistic. In a romance,

Vargrave and Lucile, despite all the vicissitudes, would be together at the end in some kind of blissful union - Mathilda, perhaps, having been bestowed on Luvois in the meantime. Lucile, the verse-novel, however, imitates real life where lovers are not always so fortunate.

The chief interest of Lucile is not story but characters. The story itself is not particularly exciting. Whenever anything dramatic does occur, as, for example, when a severe storm in the Pyrenees threatens the life of Lucile, the poet seems far more concerned with his characters' reactions than with external events. As the lightning flashes and rips around them on the mountain ledge, Vargrave passionately repledges his love to Lucile.

Lucile, then, is primarily a study of three people "recognizable in terms of our own experience." These people not only laugh and love, but, as in real life, they become jealous, give way to fits of selfish passion, and suffer frustration and defeat. Because Lucile presents a realistic picture of life, it fits my definition of a verse-novel.

Glenaveril is a tale of two men - Lord Glenaveril, the son of an English nobleman, and Emanuel Muller, the son of a lowly German pastor - born in the same house on the same day. The lives of the two, as might be expected, are

inextricably interwoven from the beginning (Meredith implies at the outset that the two children might have been interchanged). As they grow up and become close friends, each becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his own position in life and ever more envious of the state of the other. Finally they decide to change places, temporarily at least. While posing as Glenaveril, Emanuel climbs an Alpine peak steeped in romantic legend and falls to his death from the pinnacle. Glenaveril continues to live as Emanuel.

Prior to his death Emanuel had received a strange letter from a girl in the United States. The girl stated that her father, a German-American, had once been engaged to marry Emanuel's mother. Though forever parted from his beloved by cruel fate, he continued to love her, and had requested before his death that his only daughter, the heiress to his accumulated fortune, be united with her only son, Emanuel. Emanuel had scoffed at the letter, but had permitted Glenaveril to correspond with the girl, using his (Emanuel's) name. Eventually, without meeting the girl except in her letters, Glenaveril fell in love with her.

Subsequently Glenaveril meets the girl "destined" for his German friend. Complications arise. Glenaveril falls ill. Eventually, with the aid of his kindly old friend Professor Edelrath, Glenaveril marries the beautiful lady.

Glenaveril, like Lucile, is mainly a study of people and their problems. The hero, Glenaveril, is really the chief source of interest in the poem. Owen Meredith presents a very thorough picture of this man: his emotions, his thoughts, his reactions. He reveals Glenaveril's strong influence upon those he encounters: upon his tenants, his friends, and especially upon Emanuel, and he shows us how others affect him. As the poem progresses Glenaveril passes through several of life's stages, from childhood to adult maturity. Glenaveril portrays the development of a man.

The story of Glenaveril may seem, at times, romantic. The circumstances surrounding his birth are unusual: he and Emanuel, of completely different nationalities and backgrounds, born in the same house and at almost the same hour, are probably interchanged. The episode in which the heroine comes into his life is, to say the least, extraordinary. The story told in her letter - a story of betrothed lovers parted by fate, her father's subsequent rise from poverty to fabulous wealth, his life-long desire (despite his marriage to another woman) to have his only daughter united with the son of his first love - is strange: real life is seldom like that.

Despite the romantic episodes, however, and despite a number of coincidences and chance meetings³ that sometimes

³ Professor Edelrath, for instance, stumbling more or less blindly across the countryside at one point in the story, happens on the very villa where the sick Glenaveril is staying.

strain our credulity, the story of Lord Glenaveril seems possible and real. The characters, on the whole, seem like real people (though the heroine at times may appear too perfect). Glenaveril himself, in his concern for the welfare of his tenants, and his apparent dislike of class distinctions, etc., reflects some of the socialistic philosophies of nineteenth century England. Many of the problems facing Glenaveril and his friends seem real enough too: Glenaveril uses Emanuel's name in corresponding with the heroine, for example, and eventually suffers a great deal of discomfort and embarrassment when he explains his deception. Then, too, there are moments of stark realism: Emanuel's death, in spite of its romantic surroundings, is both realistic and tragic.

Glenaveril is a serious attempt to portray life. Owen Meredith himself suggests this in Book VI, Canto IV:

But all the images thou dost behold
 Reflected here, whate'er they seem to be,
 Are life's reflections.

Because it is an attempted portrayal of life (as one man views it), Glenaveril is clearly a verse-novel.

II - The Verse-novelettes of Tennyson and Clough

Earlier (in Chapter I) I noted that, unless a fictitious narrative attained a minimum length of fifty thousand words, it should be considered a novelette rather than a novel. Three of Tennyson's poems - The Princess, Maud, and Enoch Arden - seem to fit my definition of the verse-novel in everything but length. I shall now examine these poems to show that, although too brief to be called verse-novels, they do display the other important characteristics of the genre.

Called a verse-novelette by Samuel Chew,⁴ The Princess has many of the distinguishing features of a novel. First, there is a degree of realism. The frame for the story of Princess Ida is life-like. The setting is the grounds of Sir Walter Vivian's estate during a summer picnic. Tennyson provides the people, the accoutrements, and especially the proper picnic atmosphere. The conversation, light and meaningless at first, as befits the gaiety of the picnic, turns more serious eventually. Lilia, a beautiful, high-spirited Victorian girl, given an opening, brings into the

⁴ A Literary History of England, vol. IV, The Nineteenth Century and After (1789-1939) (New York, 1948), p. 1384.

discussion a topic close to the hearts of many high-spirited Victorian women: the business of feminine rights: "There are thousands now such (aggressive, capable, etc.) women, but convention beats them down." She wishes she were a princess, so that she could build a women's college "far off from men," and teach young ladies "all men know" - but "twice as quick."

To "kill the time," Lilia and her companions decide to tell a chain-story, taking Lilia herself as the heroine. The story, they decide, will be set in medieval times. Lilia, in fiction, will be indeed a princess (Ida), and will establish her women's college. The ladies of the picnic will be her academic companions; the gentlemen present will be the antagonists.

Though the ensuing chain-story of Princess Ida⁵ is fictitious, set in quasi-romantic medieval surroundings, and only, as Tennyson puts it, "mock-solemn," there is, nonetheless, some realism. The characters in the story (and we never really forget that they represent the actual people at Sir Walter's

⁵ In the chain-story Princess Ida establishes her women's college, decreeing that no man shall enter there. The "prince" (one of the gentlemen at Sir Walter's picnic) and his followers disguise themselves as women and are admitted. When the men are discovered a struggle ensues and the "prince" is wounded. Princess Ida pities him and falls in love with him. The other ladies in the group also fall in love with the intruding males and the women's college scheme is wrecked.

picnic) undergo some real suffering. Lady Psyche, for example, suffers acutely when her loyalties are divided between her brother and her feminine companions. Princess Ida in her rage tumbles unromantically into the river at one point. Lady Blanche suffers for awhile the loss of her darling child, Melissa. There are also other little touches of realism, bits of human interest of the type often found in the novel. Cyril, for instance, masquerading as a woman among women, forgets himself under the influence of wine and sings some off-colour tavern ditties, thereby revealing the true masculine identities of himself and the rest of the princely retinue.

As in a novel, so in The Princess, the emphasis is on character. The chief interest of this poem is Lilia, the lively Victorian girl eager for complete emancipation. Tennyson uses the story of Princess Ida to illustrate that the kind of emancipation Lilia so fervently advocates, an emancipation that would not only uplift the woman to the level of the man, but also isolate her from him, is neither practical nor desirable. The result is that Lilia, suffering vicariously with the fictional Princess Ida, acquires wisdom and maturity.

With its special concern for the rights and independence of Victorian women, Tennyson's The Princess resembles Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh. Too short to be classed as a novel,

The Princess may be called a verse-novelette.

Maud, a Monodrama is a narrative entirely concerned with character. In this poem Tennyson reveals the turbulent emotions of a mentally-disturbed "hero" as he reacts to a set of sharp crises. The character of the unnamed "hero" develops (degenerates) as the poem progresses. The man sinks from a state of mental disturbance to absolute insanity.

Tennyson's portrayal of abnormality, though sometimes morbid and strange, even bordering occasionally on the macabre, nevertheless has that air of reality, that "sense of life", one usually finds in the novel. Though the "hero" is abnormal, he is still "recognizable in terms of our own experience." Here is a man broken by a set of adverse circumstances: the suicide of his father, his passionate love for an aristocratic woman, the violent opposition of her family, and the inevitable clash with its fatal results. Such circumstances can, and do, arise in real life. Tennyson, as a novelist might do, arouses a great deal of sympathy for the pathetic "hero" of his verse-novelette.

Introspective as it is, Maud, a Monodrama continually bares the inner thoughts and emotions of the "hero". Its mode is not entirely unlike that of the subsequent stream-of-consciousness novel.

Enoch Arden, the pathetic tale of the long-lost sailor husband who returns to find his wife re-married, displays most of the characteristics of a verse-novel. Its setting, realistic enough, is a small English seaport. Its characters are appropriate to the setting: small-town people: a sailor, a miller, and "the prettiest damsel in the port." The story is quite possible, and except for some minor details, perhaps, seems probable.

G.K. Chesterton said that, "The key to this new form of art [the novel] ... is sympathy suffering with all who suffer."⁶ Enoch Arden is all about suffering: the suffering of Philip Ray, watching the woman he loves find happiness with the "other man"; of Annie Lee, the Penelope whose Ulysses the cruel sea seemingly does not return; and especially of Enoch Arden, forced by fate to sacrifice his very reason for living so that those he loves may enjoy their new-found lives.

The pathetic situation of Annie and Enoch Arden arouses our sympathies; we feel for them and with them; we share at least a portion of their emotional lives. A poem that gives "the sense of life" fits my definition of the verse-novel. Since, like The Princess and Maud, it is too brief to be classed a verse-novel, Enoch Arden is a verse-novelette.

⁶ The Victorian Age in Literature, Home University Library of Modern Knowledge (London, 1913), p. 94.

Two poems by Arthur Hugh Clough - The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich and Amours de Voyage - seem to belong to the novel genre, and therefore merit examination. The Bothie, called by Samuel Chew a "novelette in hexameters",⁷ has two of the main features of a novel. First, it portrays people "recognizable in terms of our own experience." The chief characters, Oxford students vacationing in the highlands of Scotland, all seem real, living persons. Philip Hewson, the poet, stands out particularly: a man of strong opinions, of independent spirit, of vacillating emotions (he falls in love with three girls in surprisingly rapid succession) - a real individual. Elspie, the beautiful, wise, mature, but humble, Highland girl is also quite convincing.

The Bothie also conveys a "sense of life", that aura of realism the Victorians considered so necessary in a novel. The young Oxford vacationers banter, laugh, swim, dance, and as gay young men would do, they make love to the Highland girls; but there are serious undertones too. Often the discussion turns to current social problems. Philip Hewson, who preaches fervent socialism, eventually falls in love with Elspie, the girl quite definitely beneath his station. Abruptly his socialist theories undergo a very practical

⁷ The Nineteenth Century and After (1789-1939), vol. VI, 1406.

testing. True to his convictions, Philip marries the girl, emigrates to a farm in New Zealand, and in all probability lives happily ever afterwards. As it might do in real life, and as it probably would do in a novel, true love triumphs in the end.

Like Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh, The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich is greatly concerned with social problems: the classes of society, the place of women in society, etc. Because it deals with the same type of questions as the so-called "social novels"⁸ of Charles Kingsley or Mrs. Gaskell, then we should probably classify The Bothie as a "social verse-novelette."

Clough's second lengthy poem, Amours de Voyage,⁹ tells the love story¹⁰ of a young Englishman living in Italy. In this poem Clough, as a novelist would, focuses our attention upon characters: upon Claude, the "hero", and upon Mary Trevellyn, the object of his belated affections.

⁸ See George Sampson, The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature (Cambridge, 1959), p. 776-86.

⁹ Called a verse-novel by Geoffrey Bullough in Mirror of Minds (Toronto, 1962), p. 180, Amours de Voyage is only about 1500 lines, or 16,000 words in length.

¹⁰ The story is told in a series of unanswered letters written by Claude and Mary to a personal friend of each. In adopting this epistolary form, Clough makes use of a novelistic device popular with Richardson and other early eighteenth century novelists.

Claude, a vacillating, dilatory "hero", is scarcely suitable for an epic or a romance, mainly because he is such an unromantic coward. Afraid of politics and war, of marriage and the realities of life, he retreats to the world of art, to the study of Roman ruins where everything is comfortably impersonal and unemotional. Aware at last (after Mary has finally left him) that he is really in love, Claude makes a frantic, but unsuccessful, attempt to find his beloved.

Because Claude is such an unromantic hero Amours de Voyage seems realistic and life-like. Unlike the romantic hero who is likely to be faultless, Claude has, in large measure, certain universal human weaknesses: timidity, tardiness, etc. As a result of his failings we readily accept Claude as a human being, not too different from many of us.

Mary Trevellyn seems human too. Eager for love, she reaches out to Claude, patiently, hopefully, and at last pathetically. Bitterly disappointed at the end, she has our sympathy. The very fact that she is unable to get her man, and that they do not (as in a romance) live happily ever after, makes the poem seem even more realistic.

The background against which the story moves is realistic too. Clough sets his story in Italy during a

specific period in Italian history. The "hero" becomes involved in a real war; there is confusion and flight. The ugly reality of war is especially dramatized in the episode of the butchered priest.

Amours de Voyage is greatly concerned with the personality of Claude, his thoughts, his varying moods, his passions, and his usually complicated motives. Since this poem probes a man's mind and examines his soul, it may be classed as a psychological verse-novelette.

In addition to those I have discussed,¹¹ the Victorians wrote many other long narrative poems that, according to my definition, might be classed as verse-novels: Browning's Sordello (the story of a thirteenth century troubadour's attempts to cope with life), and William Allingham's Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland (a realistic account of Irish life in turbulent times) are but two examples.

The main purpose of this paper, however, has not been to survey all of Victorian verse narrative, but rather to examine the term "verse-novel", particularly as it has been applied to certain examples of that verse narrative.

11

I have confined my discussion to poems actually referred to by critics as verse-novels or verse-novelettes.

Even a limited examination of the genre reveals that the Victorian verse-novel embraced many of the modes of contemporary prose fiction: social criticism, "romance", etc. The verse-novel of the period, therefore, should not be regarded as (to use biological terminology) merely a sport or mutation; it was really intended to be a proper species of the novel, homologous to the realistic prose novel of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER V

THE VICTORIAN VERSE-NOVEL: AN EVALUATION

Several factors probably account for the number and the variety of verse-novels in the Victorian Period. The contemporary prose novel, at the height of its popularity, was "the dominant form of entertainment".¹ Verse-novelists may have hoped to share the popularity and prestige of the prose novel.²

The prose novel, too, seemed to have usurped as its own proper subject matter the whole field of contemporary life, leaving to poetry the glories of the dead past. While Dickens, Kingsley, Mrs. Gaskell and others were handling current problems and situations, Tennyson (in the Idylls) and Browning (in Paracelsus and Sordello) appeared to be reviving matters medieval. Poets like Mrs. Browning were apparently not satisfied to leave the contemporary scene entirely to the novelists. Mrs. Browning declares that in

¹ G.D. Klingopulos, "The Literary Scene", From Dickens to Hardy, p. 98.

² The earlier popularity of Sir Walter Scott's verse-romances seemed to indicate that there certainly was a buying public for long verse narratives.

her verse novel Aurora Leigh she is going "to rush into drawing rooms and the like" and meet "face to face without mask the Humanity of the age" and speak "the truth of it out plainly". Through Aurora she states in Book Five of her novel-poem that the sole work of poets is to present their own age, not Charlemagne's: this is obviously a challenge to poets to wrestle with the novelists on their own grounds.

Virginia Woolf implies that all the Victorian verse-novelists may have accepted (or in the case of Clough anticipated) her challenge:

The poets may well have felt, with Aurora Leigh, that modern life had an intensity, a beauty, and an ugliness of its own. Why should all these spoils, they asked naturally, fall to the lot of the prose writers? Why should the poet be forced back to the remoteness of Charlemagne and Roland, the toga and the picturesque, when Jane Eyre and Lord Steyne and Peggotty and the Battle of Waterloo and the humours and ironies of village life, drawing-room life, club life, and street life all cried aloud for celebration? It was true that the old form in which poetry had dealt with life - the drama - was obsolete: but was there none other that could take its place? Mrs. Browning, convinced of the divinity of poetry ... threw down her challenge to the Brontes and the Thackerays in blank verse. 3

In unfamiliar literary territory, the verse-novelists soon encountered a host of new problems. Virginia Woolf enumerates many of the difficulties in her appraisal of

Aurora Leigh:

In the first place there is the story; the tale must be told; and how is the poet to convey to us the necessary information that the hero has been asked out to dinner? ⁴

Sometimes the "necessary information" is conveyed poetically; and then the words "strut and posture", as Virginia Woolf puts it, and "take on an emphasis that they cannot bear without becoming ridiculous".⁵ In opening the Second Book of Aurora Leigh, for example, Mrs. Browning metaphorically informs us that her heroine has reached her twentieth birthday:

Times follow one another. Came a morn
I stood upon the brink of twenty years,
And looked before and after

Such a poetic rendition of the commonplace sounds unnatural. Artificiality tends to diminish the aura of realism. For the moment at least, Aurora Leigh is slightly less effective as a novel.

At other times mundane details are prosaically delivered. At one point in The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich

4

The Yale Review, p. 687.

5

Ibid.

Clough gives us the immediate itinerary of his vacationing Oxonians in lines that are nothing more than metered prose:

But the tutor enquired, the grave man, nick-named Adam,
Where do you mean to go, and whom do you mean to visit?
And he was answered by Hope, the Viscount, His Honour,
of Ilay.
Kitcat, a Trinity coach, has a party at Drumnadrochet,
Up on the side of Loch Ness, in the beautiful valley of
Urquhart;
Mainwaring says they will lodge us, and feed us, and give
us a lift too:
Only they talk ere long to remove to Glenmorison. Then at
Castleton, high in Braemar, strange home, with his earliest
party,
Harrison, fresh from the schools, has James and Jones and
Lauder.
Thirdly, a Cambridge man I know, Smith, a senior wrangler,
With a mathematical score hangs-out at Inverary.

Though entirely appropriate in a novel, "necessary information" of this sort certainly does not make good poetry. In this instance The Bothie is somewhat less effective as a poem.

Most of the Victorian verse-novelists seem to have had problems "telling the tale": setting down the details of time and place. Owen Meredith provides what is perhaps the worst example. In Lucile he sets this scene in a melange of poetry, quasi-poetry, and colloquial prose:

The month is September;
Time, morning; the scene at Bigorre; (pray re-
member
These facts, gentle reader, because I intend
To fling all these unities by at the end.)
He walk'd to the window. The morning was chill;
The brown woods were crisp'd in the cold on the
hill:

The soul [sic.] thing abroad in the streets was
 the wind:
 And the straws on the gust, like the thoughts in
 his mind,
 Rose, and eddied around and around, as tho' teasing
 Each other. The prospect, in truth, was unpleasing;
 And Lord Alfred, whilst moodily gazing around
 To himself more than once (vex'd in soul) sigh'd
 "Confound it!"

The heterogeneity of a passage that gives mere information
 at the beginning, bursts into poetry in mid-stream, and ends
 with an emasculated oath, is disturbing.

The second problem facing the Victorian verse-
 novelist, Virginia Woolf states, is how to create natural,
 effective dialogue:

Then, again, what will the poet do with dialogue?
 ... in dialogue ... character is expressed and
 defined But poetry when set to report the
 speech that winds in and out of the intricacies of
 character, and gives accent to the crisis is terribly
 impeded.... Talk tossed upon the surge and swing
 of the verse becomes high, rhetorical, impassioned;
 and since the talk, for there is no action to stop it,
 goes on, the reader's mind stiffens and glazes under
 the monotony of the rhythm. 6

Mrs. Woolf gives an example (from Aurora Leigh) of dialogue
 which, instead of being naturally dramatic, is merely
 rhetorical. In this speech Romney Leigh talks to his old
 love Marian about the baby which she has borne another man:

"May God so father me, as I do him,
 And so forsake me, as I let him feel,
 He's orphaned haply. Here I take the child
 To share my cup, to slumber on my knee,
 To play his loudest gambol at my foot,
 To hold my finger in the public ways".

"Romney rants and reels like any orator on a tub", Mrs. Woolf comments, "or like any of those Elizabethan heroes whom Mrs. Browning had so carefully warned off her modern drawing room."⁷

As in Aurora Leigh, dialogue in Lucile is sometimes awkward, stilted, unnatural. This exchange between Alfred, the hero, and his close friend John is an example:

John

Bless me! "Lucile?
 The Comtess de Nevers?"

Alfred

Yes.

John

What will you do?

Alfred

You ask me just what I would rather ask you.

John

You can't go.

Alfred

I must

John

And Mathilda.

Alfred

Oh that
You must manage!

Unlike Romney's speech (quoted above), this exchange does not even have the saving grace of sounding theatrical. Scrappy dialogue like this, cast in poetic form, is clumsy. Since in real life conversation is seldom rhymed, rarely "poetic", the Victorian verse-novelist sometimes found it difficult to maintain that "sense of life" considered so important in the contemporary novel.

The third problem for the verse-novelist, Virginia Woolf points out, is how to avoid the detrimental effects of meter and rhythm in a long narrative poem:

Following the lilt of her rhythm rather than the emotions of her characters, Mrs. Browning is swept on into generalization and declamation. Forced by the nature of her medium she ignores the slighter, the subtler, the more hidden shades of emotion, by which a novelist builds up, touch by touch, a character in prose.... The poem becomes one long soliloquy. 8

"The poem becomes one long soliloquy" - this statement seems especially true of such a verse-novel as Clough's The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich. Open this book and listen: no matter whose opinions are being expressed at the moment, the voice is inevitably Clough's. The eloquence of Philip, the poet, the sagacity of Adam, the tutor, the wit of Hope, the Piper, all have the same tone and pitch - the poet's hexameters provide their common denominator.

In addition to establishing a monotony of tone and pitch, a fixed meter tends to dictate a certain pace, a seemingly regular rate of movement in a long narrative poem. The pace throughout Aurora Leigh tends to be remarkably uniform; and The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich continuously ebbs and flows at hexameter rate.

In their attempts to discover a congenial and appropriate medium, the Victorian verse-novelists apparently experimented with a variety of verse forms: blank verse (Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book, Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh), hexameters (Clough's The Bothie, Amours de Voyage), a medley of verse forms (Tennyson's The Princess, Maud). Unlike the Elizabethan dramatists, however, the Victorian verse-novelists obviously did not find a single type of verse uniquely apt.

The multitude of problems involved in simultaneously producing both a good novel and a good poem apparently proved

too much for the Victorian verse-novelists. Despite their obvious sincerity and seriousness of purpose, and despite their impressive volume and their variety, they failed to create a single really outstanding novel in verse.⁹ Perhaps the best of them all is Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book. Many people might well agree with Henry James that The Ring and the Book is indeed a good novel, an admirable study of human character under stress and crisis, but few except Browning enthusiasts unhesitatingly declare it an excellent poem.

There may be many reasons why the Victorian verse-novelists failed to produce a great novel. Perhaps the fact that all of them were dedicated poets rather than novelists partly accounts for their failure. Tennyson, Robert Browning, Mrs. Browning were long established as poets before they turned towards the novel. As established poets the Victorian verse-novelists wrote (and here I shall attempt to draw a rather nice distinction), not so much verse-novels, as novels in verse, or better still, novels-into-verse. Mrs. Browning in Aurora Leigh was not attempting, it seems to me, primarily to create a novel like Mary Barton or Ruth,

Contemporary popularity, notwithstanding (Mrs. Browning published Aurora Leigh in 1856 and by 1873 it had gone through some thirteen editions).

the only difference between her work and Mrs. Gaskell's being that of language. What she was really doing, I believe, was adapting novelistic material to poetry, attempting, in effect, a form of translation: translating contemporary social conditions into romance, prosaic materials into poetic form, colloquialism into poetry. The same thing might be said of Tennyson's The Princess. Here again we see, perhaps even more closely, the poet at work: producing a novelette, but thinking and writing like a poet. Only occasionally, it seems, did a verse-novelist become really engrossed in the business of producing a novel: i.e. creating distinctive, life-like characters; Tennyson obviously did in Maud, and Browning in The Ring and the Book.

Another reason for the failure of the Victorian verse-novelists was that their attempts at the novel were premature and ill-timed. Tennyson, the Brownings, Clough, and the others turned to the novel, Virginia Woolf suggests,¹⁰ as a truly "modern" form of dealing with life. The Victorian novel, however, the novel of Dickens, Kingsley, and Disraeli, was still very firmly tied to all the old conventions of realism. The traditional genres of narrative verse, meanwhile, prostituted at the hands of such lesser Romantic poets as Southey, were well nigh exhausted. To

combine the realistic novel and traditional verse was to pour new wine into old bottles. Obviously some great changes were required in both the novel and poetry before the verse-novel could be successful.

Postscript - The Verse-novel in the New Age

It was not till the twentieth century that many of the old conventions in both the novel and narrative poetry were swept away. Early in this century, for example, novelists such as James Joyce (in Ulysses) and Virginia Woolf (in The Waves and To the Lighthouse) challenged the long-accepted concepts of realism. "They have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things"¹¹ [mere externals], said Mrs. Woolf of traditional novelists. "Look within", she advised, "Life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."¹² In her novels Virginia Woolf's approach to life ("the luminous halo") was essentially that of a poet.¹³

¹¹ As cited in The English Novel by Walter Allen, p. 413.

¹² Ibid., p. 414.

¹³ "It has become customary", Walter Allen notes (in The English Novel, p. 421, "to write of Virginia Woolf as though she were essentially a poet who happened to use the medium of prose."

She was one of those who brought the novel, both in language and form,¹⁴ very close to poetry: her novels are "poetic" novels.

About the same time, certain poets - T.S. Eliot (in The Wasteland), for example, - produced experimental forms that are nearly novels.¹⁵ While it would not fit my definition of the realistic novel, The Wasteland resembles a novel because it portrays life as Eliot saw it in a particular time and place. Eliot "gathered up the life of post-war Europe and exposed it", says Sir Ifor Evans of The Wasteland, "portraying a civilization that had no belief, only a past".¹⁶ The Wasteland, then, is, in many respects, a "novelistic" poem.

In the new age of "poetic" novels and "novelistic" poems, with many of the old conventions that so hampered the Victorian verse-novelists laid aside, conditions at last seemed favourable for a modern form of the verse-novel. Despite the newly propitious climate, however, the genre has not really flourished. In the twentieth century the proportion of novels written in verse remains minute.

¹⁴
As I noted in Chapter I.

¹⁵
David Jones (In Parenthesis) and Ezra Pound (The Cantos) also wrote poems that may be regarded as "novelistic".

¹⁶
A Short History of English Literature, p. 74.

Novelists obviously have not favoured the verse-novel.¹⁷ One may justifiably ask, then, whether the form is really a viable one. Chaucer seems to have provided the positive answer. His Troilus and Criseyde, critics agree, is an excellent novel in verse: "one of the best ... a tragedy of character - profoundly moving",¹⁸ "a story ... with characters adapting themselves to different circumstances ... moving freely and talking like men and women",¹⁹ "flesh and blood persons - Pandarus, Criseyde, Troilus - and live and developing human relationships".²⁰

Although the form may have its limitations, then,²¹ it is possible to produce a good verse novel. Richard Church, a twentieth century critic, says that in story telling verse has certain natural advantages over prose:

17

Though several novelists - George Meredith, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, for example - have written "poetic" novels that seem to have been quite successful.

18

G.L. Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry, p. 109.

19

W.P. Ker, Epic and Romance, p. 367.

20

John Speirs, The Age of Chaucer, p. 20.

21

I have already discussed many of the technical difficulties encountered by the Victorian verse-novelists.

If the function of a fictitious tale be to distill life's confusion of events and characters into a 'significant simplicity' (as R.L. Stevenson demanded), the verse-tale, by reason of its medium, does the job better than prose, because verse epitomizes while prose displays. 22

Virginia Woolf agrees, illustrating the advantages of the verse-novel:

Indeed, if we compare the prose novel and the novel-poem, the triumphs are by no means all to the credit of prose. As we rush through page after page of narrative in which a dozen scenes that the novelist would smooth out separately are pressed into one, in which pages of deliberate description are fused into a single line, we cannot help feeling that the poet has outpaced the novelist. Her [Mrs. Browning's] page is packed twice as full as his. Characters, too, if they are not shown in conflict, but snipped off and summed up with something of the audacity of a caricaturist have a vigour and completeness that prose with its gradual approach cannot rival. The general aspect of the world - here a scene in church, here a flower market, here a London sunset, here a suburb - the look of things seen from a height by a bird as it flies, are all conveyed by the compressions and elision of poetry and the emotional current of metre with a brilliancy and with a continuity that mock the prose writer and his slow accumulations of careful detail. 23

The "careful detail" of prose ... the "emotional current" of poetry - the appropriate medium for the novelist should be largely determined, it seems to me, by the nature of the material he is handling and by his approach to his

22

The Growth of the English Novel (London, 1951) p. 3.

23

The Yale Review, p. 689.

subject. Prose is obviously best at giving the "careful details". Just as a newspaper photographer would use his camera to record the factual details of a particular scene, so should a novelist use prose to present his factual, realistic representation of people and events, when that is the chief purpose and business of his novel. I think it entirely appropriate, therefore, that a novel such as Fanny Burney's Evelina (which proposes to "mirror the idiosyncrasies, the peculiar temporalities of London life"²⁴), or Disraeli's Sybil (a discussion of contemporary problems in industry), or George Eliot's Felix Holt (which presents "a detailed picture of England's political turmoil in the days of the Reform Bill"²⁵), should be written mainly or wholly in prose.

Verse, however, is not a natural (or really effective) medium in which to present facts and figures, give information, record prosaic details. By tradition, poetry seems to be the natural language of the emotions. Just as a painter, eschewing the camera, would utilize brush and oils to capture the ephemeral glories of the sunset, so might the novelist express the emotional, the spiritual, the transcendental in verse. If the novelist, therefore, is

²⁴ Cavalcade of the English Novel, p. 135.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 326.

chiefly interested in the impression rather than the actual, the "artistic" rather than the realistic, verse could be the proper medium for his novel. Robert Browning, for example, in The Ring and the Book is much more concerned with motives and passions than with the mere facts of an old Roman murder case, so, appropriately, his novel is a verse-novel. Virginia Woolf, too, was chiefly involved with the emotional experiences of her characters; she might well have written in verse the greater portion of The Waves and To the Lighthouse.

Since verse is not the best medium for "careful details", however, very few novels should be written entirely in verse. It is almost inevitable that any novel, however dramatic, will have its "prosey" sections. Information must be given, scenes and backgrounds described. Why should such material be written in verse? Shakespeare surely established a precedent for the successful verse-novelist: in his poetic dramas he generally phrased the mundane (the Porter's scene in Macbeth Act II, scene iii, Antonio's conversation with Sebastian in Twelfth Night Act II, scene i, for example) in prose. Owen Meredith's Lucile would seem much more realistic and convincing if some of the dialogue and the background

material²⁶ were given in prose. Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book, too, might be an even better novel if much or all of the dry legal arguments of Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis and Dr. Johannes-Baptista Bottinius were recast in prose.

Interspersing prose in a verse-novel would surely break the continuous, sometimes even monotonous, flow of rhythm and meter. If Mrs. Browning had occasionally resorted to prose she might not have been, as Virginia Woolf put it, "swept on into generalization and declamation" ("following the lilt of her rhythm rather than the emotions of her characters").²⁷ As in a Shakespearian play, so in a verse-novel, interspersed prose would provide, in the appropriate places, a kind of dramatic relief.

If a competent twentieth century novelist, then, restricted his use of verse to appropriate themes and material, I see no reason why he could not produce a truly successful verse-novel. Apparently contemporary novelists

²⁶ Particularly the lines (quoted on page 110 of this paper) beginning at:
The month is September;
Time, morning; the scene at Bigorre; ...

²⁷ The Yale Review, p. 688.

are content to follow tradition, and to cater to the obvious public preference for prose. As for modern poets, Virginia Woolf's criticism of some forty years ago may still apply. Their "conservatism" and "timidity", she concluded, "still leaves the chief spoils of modern life to the [prose] novelist".²⁸

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