

NOVELS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

NORMAN WARD

FOR a long time the novelist has had the task of observing and describing society pretty well to himself. It is only in the past few decades that social scientists, armed with slide-rules and various tools for collecting statistics, have seriously begun to invade the novelist's territory *en masse*. The historian and the economist, it is true, can claim to be the descendants of long lines of observers, but they have until recently been observers of man's public activities rather than of the field of personal affairs that is becoming increasingly the stamping-ground for the psychologist and the sociologist. Now, indeed, no citizen is safe from the prying eye or prodding finger of the student of society.

The modern social scientist would no doubt like to distinguish himself from the novelist by having us think that when he describes a particular section of society he is extending the frontiers of knowledge. A natural question that comes to mind is, "Is there anything the matter with the way in which the novelist does it?" And if one compares the general situation described in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* or Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, with that revealed in *Middletown*, a careful study by two professional sociologists (Robert and Helen Lynd) of the economic, social, and religious life in a town surprisingly like Mr. Babbitt's, one is obliged to admit that the answer to the question cannot be given as confidently as it might at first appear. It would seem to be a hypothesis worth investigating that Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* or Arnold Bennett's *Tales of the Five Towns*, for example, may bear a strong resemblance to studies of the social scenes with which they deal. Perhaps every social scientist carries unwritten novels in his knapsack, or perhaps every novelist is a social observer who, like Arnold Bennett, merely hates "the awful business of research."

It can be argued, of course, that the novelist is unscientific, and relies on intuition or other highly subjective instruments, whereas the social scientist is objective, so far as is humanly possible, and supports his arguments with careful measurements and frequent references to the work of other scientists, all as admirably detached as himself. A novelist, to take a mundane example, is all too likely to describe a square foot of sod intuitively as a square foot of sod, no matter what technique he may use, and let it go at that. The social scientist, on the other

hend, can prove beyond argument that it is not really a square foot of sod at all, but only appears to be. In actual fact, it is so many thousand blades of grass, of a certain average length, seeming to grow out of a chemical compound called soil, the exact nature of which can be determined by reference to a handbook on the subject. The whole may resemble a square foot of sod, but this is a superficial view.

Even a scientist is human, however, and the more human are the phenomena he is studying, the more will he have to rely on unscientific human methods of measuring them, no matter what he may think he is doing. "Any writer in any field whatever," John P. Marquand, a successful contemporary novelist, has remarked in the preface to *H. M. Pulham, Esquire*, "every time he sets down a sentence, is translating his observation of life as he has known it"—even, presumably, when he records a sentence such as that quoted. Mr. Marquand's honest observation, that is, is itself subjective. But can the social scientist lay claim to any greater objectivity? Let a distinguished representative of the craft answer that question:—

I believe that our "material" sciences are more entangled with values than we usually imagine, that we cannot study even stars or rocks or atoms without being somehow determined, in our modes of systematization, in the prominence given to one or another part of the subject, in the form of question we ask and attempt to answer, by direct and human interests. The facts are not, but they have, values. In the study of all human phenomena, on the other hand, the facts, some of them, not only have, but are, values.¹

In the light of this admission, where then does the impartial scientist start to work to analyze a problem? Obviously he cannot study all the facts in a given situation, even if he could determine what they all were, and must therefore choose arbitrarily among them. And in his choice, it seems fair to conclude, he will be relying very largely on the same thing which, he might argue, makes the novelist unscientific—i.e. his intuition. By no amount of training, it is suggested, can he evade that.

But at least, it can be argued, the social scientist will be less likely to exaggerate, for it can hardly be denied that novelists do, for dramatic or other purposes, exaggerate various aspects of human activities. To quote Mr. Marquand again, "But when it comes to drawing a character from life and setting his

1. R. M. MacIver. *Community*.

personality upon the printed page, nearly every writer whom I have ever met will tell you that no actual human being is convincing in this highly artificial environment. . . . The same is true with the setting, and even the element of time must not be taken seriously." The novelist, that is (assuming subjectively that Mr. Marquand is typical), whether relying on intuition or not, does not pretend to present a truthful picture, and may even be deliberately distorting it. The exception to prove this rule might be Mr. Upton Sinclair, who makes most of his novels into pamphlets, and therefore feels no doubt a certain responsibility to adhere to the literal truth in a situation he is describing. "What I think I know," he states in the preface to *Boston*, which deals with the Sacco-Vanzetti case, "I have told the reader. What is uncertain, I have so portrayed—and have let the partisans of both sides voice their feelings and beliefs." Mr. Sinclair's attitude might be an admirable one for every social scientist to adopt, yet it is doubtful whether even this author, to create the illusion of reality, can avoid "editing" his material and overdrawing his characters, for the reason implied in the quotation from Mr. Marquand.

It must not be assumed, however, that the novelist is necessarily inferior to the social scientist merely because he exaggerates. Some social sciences, particularly certain branches of psychology and sociology, concentrate almost entirely on abnormalities and maladjustments, thus undoubtedly giving a distorted picture of the whole. An analogous example is found in the following paraphrase of a passage of G. K. Chesterton's by a Canadian political scientist, R. MacGregor Dawson, "It is one great weakness of political science as a picture of our modern state, that it must be a picture made up entirely of exceptions. It announces in a conspicuous paragraph that a judge has been removed for corruption. It does not announce in a conspicuous paragraph that a judge has not been removed for corruption . . . Hence the complete picture they (political scientists) give of the state is of necessity fallacious; they can only represent what is unusual.' In short," he adds, "the study of the institutions and officials of a state must be largely pathological."² It can surely be argued that any study which presents less than the whole of any subject under observation is a distorted one.

Even where a scientific study is comprehensive, rather than pathological, however, the scientist is not free from the suspicion

of exaggeration (or whatever we choose to call it), for in order to reduce his material to manageable proportions he has to proceed by making various simplifying assumptions, either explicitly or implicitly. (This essay, it may be interjected here, assumes that all novelists are trying substantially to do the same thing, however they might go about it, and that all social scientists can be similarly put in one classification in that they are all attempting to describe and analyze society.) Consider, for example, the vast structure of economic and other theory dependent on the basic assumption that man is a rational animal—an assumption now explicitly denied by some schools of psychology. Or, more specifically, consider the assumptions on which the study of *Middletown*, referred to above, was made. "This study," say its authors, . . . "proceeds on the assumption that all the things people do in this American city may be viewed as falling under one or another of the following six main-trunk activities: getting a living; making a home; training the young; using leisure in various forms of play, art, and so on; engaging in religious practices; engaging in community activities. This particular grouping of activities is used with no idea of its exclusive merit but simply as a methodological expedient." The possibility that a distorted picture might result from any study proceeding on such a sweeping assumption will be apparent if it is asked under which of the six headings such common human activities as laughing, grieving, or thinking should be classified. The Lynds' six-fold classification can obviously deal only with external manifestations of human activity, and it seems probable that all the social sciences are similarly limited, and destined to remain so. A novelist, in dealing with the mental processes of his characters, appears to have at least the opportunity to probe a little deeper, for he can not only, like a psychologist, deal with the relations between the mind and things outside it, but also freely describe mental processes as they seem to him. But that, ironically enough, can serve no scientific purpose beyond providing a psychologist with raw material for studying the mind of the novelist himself, as it appears to the psychologist!

If, therefore, both the novelist and the social scientist must rely greatly on their own subjective judgments, and if both are prone to present biased views, are we to conclude that they are equally useful as sources of information about our own and other societies? Certainly it would seem, from comparing many books presented as novels with others purporting

social scientists, or else many of the latter are busily turning out fiction. The real answer to the question would appear to depend on the criteria by which one assesses competence in the two types of writing, and it should hardly be necessary to emphasize again that the criteria will have to be subjective ones. The most practical objective criterion that comes to mind—book sales—is unfortunately worse than useless for comparative purposes, for while a "good" novelist, by an odd coincidence, is almost always a best-seller, any social scientist whose book sells widely is regarded with grave suspicion by his colleagues, apparently on the assumption that if the book is popular it cannot be good. In some circles, indeed, even ordinary intelligibility seems to be frowned upon.

The best standard by which a reader could assess the usefulness of a book then, leaving aside the question of employment, is the degree to which he himself finds it useful in understanding society, and a strong case could be made out for the argument that neither the novelist nor the social scientist can claim to have a monopoly of describing society reliably. This is not to say that neither of them can claim to be genuinely scientific, for while society cannot be taken into a laboratory and analyzed as can the subject matter of the physical sciences, there are nevertheless criteria of scientific observation other than measurement and experiment. Nor is it to say that a particular social scientist may not be superior to a particular novelist for particular purposes, and *vice-versa*, or that some social scientists and novelists are not better than others. It can be readily admitted further that the novel may be a superior means of giving a convincing presentation of certain types of problem, as, for example, a conflict like that found in *Earth and High Heaven*, or *Two Solitudes*, for no amount of scientific classification and description can make such problems come alive in the same way that a well-written novel can. By the same token, there are countless complex situations which could not be entirely covered in a novel, because the very nature of the problem precludes presentation in a medium committed to following, however wanderingly, a marketable thread of plot. We will wait as long to find *Huckleberry Finn* reduced to charts and graphs, that is, as we will wait for a novel presenting soundly the general theory of employment. At the highest point of development in each of the two types of writing being discussed, however, there are bound to be strong similarities between the novelist and the social scientist, not only because they work under the same

fundamental limitations, but also because they are trying to do substantially the same things, though in different ways. The closer the scientist examines man's personal and social affairs, moreover, the more closely will the two types of writing approach each other.

It may therefore be concluded tentatively that a layman can read the works of both novelists and social scientists with a degree of confidence varying with his own assessment of the usefulness of various individuals, and of the extent to which he can rely on them. That, as has been said, is a highly subjective process—a weakness which cannot be avoided. It is not, however, a more subjective process than that followed by the novelist in deciding what his story is, and telling it, or by the social scientist in marking off his field of study and rejecting the irrelevant facts. There seems to be no reason why the social scientist who is considering treating novels as sources of information cannot choose between relevant and irrelevant novels in the same way in which he chooses between facts, running the same risks of ignoring important material and trusting the wrong people as he would in any ordinary "scientific" study. (C. R. Fay, an economic historian, has had a word to say about the novelist and his own particular field. "The value of the novel to the economic historian," he states in a passage headed "The Novel as a Source of Economic History" in *Great Britain from Adam Smith to the Present Day*, "is least when it is written for him. It is greatest when the economics are incidental, as in Fielding and Scott, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy.") The task of deciding what novelists do or do not capture accurately the true spirit of their problem is not an easy one, but it is no harder than deciding whether, for example, in trying to understand the policies of a particular statesman, one should examine not only his activities as a public figure, but also such things as his personal habits and the details of his childhood, either of which may have enormous significance to his public behaviour.

Actually, it would appear that the only way in which a reader could be certain that a particular novelist or social scientist was a reliable source of information regarding a society would be to perform the impossible feat of acquiring somehow a prior comprehensive knowledge of the society. If the writer in question is himself in any way a part of the society he is describing, this particular problem becomes a dilemma, for in order to have that comprehensive knowledge of the society, it

is first necessary to understand throughly the work of the author, since he is himself part of the society to be understood. Since understanding an author depends on understanding his society, and understanding the society necessitates understanding the author, it seems that whoever seeks knowledge in novels and the social sciences must face an intimidating problem of the unknowable.
