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CHARACTER AND CREDIBILITY IN *THE*

FORSYTE SAGA

DISCUSSING VINCENT SHEEAN's *Dorothy and Red* in the *New York Review of Books* several years ago, Steven Marcus wrote that Dorothy Thompson and Sinclair Lewis belonged to "the last generation of Americans who were able to believe that one could give a full and reliable account of oneself in strictly conscious terms." "They did not", he went on, "think of themselves as we have come to do. They did not think of themselves as having unconscious minds, which were overwhelmingly powerful, largely uncontrollable, and a central part of themselves." So Lewis was among the last of the external, realistic school of novelists, and the strength of his sociological images lay in their breadth of representativeness, a breadth somehow inseparable from their shallowness. In Marcus's view, we can no longer look at character in this way or accept fiction based on such assumptions concerning people and their relation to their environment.

That ought to seem completely platitudinous. Was Lawrence not telling his readers many years ago that they must not look in his novels for the old stable ego of character? Was Virginia Woolf not right in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", when she said that whatever human personality may be we cannot feel that such writers as Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy have done anything but bury it under the accumulation of external, realistic details in their novels? Even if Freudianism is now on the wane, has not our approach to personality altered so drastically that the attempts of older novelists to capture it strike us as completely unconvincing? What have Wells, Bennett, or Galsworthy to say to the world of *Enderby* or *Portnoy's Complaint*?

Curiously, whether he ought to or not, one particular exponent of the early twentieth-century sociological novel does seem to have a great deal to say to our times. "For weeks we have had happy Sundays with *The Forsyte Saga* but tomorrow is our last episode and we'll all be sad and lost." The remark comes not from illiterate television addicts but from people whose

reading of contemporary fiction is considerably greater than that of most English professors. It came at the end of a second triumphant showing of the *Saga* on the BBC. At the end of the first, Maurice Wiggin, television critic of the London *Sunday Times*, had made this assessment of it:

Whatever Miss Brigid Brophy and her High Kickers think, Galsworthy's major work, *The Forsyte Saga*, is a literary achievement which has given entirely respectable pleasure to vastly more people than ever heard of the Brophy Boys. Overrated by intellectual yobs, underrated by intellectual nobs, its actual value has been marvellously brought out by BBC 2's serialisation in twenty-six episodes which finally expired last Tuesday, like old Soames; leaving few dry eyes.

In the same paper, J. W. Lambert wrote:

Galsworthy the man and Galsworthy the writer alike remain object-lessons to all confident generalisers. No sooner has he been neatly pigeon-holed, ennobled, dismissed or made safe, than something crops up in his life, letters or conversation which clouds the picture once again. Rebel or stuffed shirt, generous heart or pompous humanitarian, sardonic ironist or sentimental conformer, . . . he eludes . . . both the embraces of his admirers and the hatchet-strokes of his detractors.

Anyone familiar with the verdict on Galsworthy rendered by historians of the novel must find this response very hard to credit. Gordon Hall Gerould, for example, complains that the characters in the novels tend to lose their vitality and drift into vague symbolism, the central figures are blurred by Galsworthy's inability to represent anything beyond the superficial aspects of character. As to plotting, themes are repeated, values are distorted by sentimental appeals, and the evidences of manipulation are all too obvious. As we follow its ramifications, the imagined England of Galsworthy becomes less and less real to us—much less vivid, in Gerould's opinion, than the England of Trollope. All the respectable critics concur in saying that the *Saga* is *not* a major achievement. But if they are right why wasn't the television presentation of it a clear proof of Galsworthy's inability to create believable characters and situations?

Many a sardonic critic must have felt that the BBC was giving the series the kind of build-up which might very well be the prelude to a wonderful flop. The newspapers had obviously been told that something special was coming. For example, half the colour supplement of the *Observer* for January 8, 1967, was devoted to Galsworthy; in an interview, Donald Wilson, writer of the script and producer of the series, told of his lifelong ambition

to film the *Saga*, his eleven-year endeavour to secure the dramatic rights to it, and the final successful effort made when the centenary of Galsworthy's birth was approaching. The day before this, the television critic of the *Times* had written, "In terms of time and effort, not to say money, nothing on this scale has been attempted before, certainly for a single work; the planning and casting, the meticulous designing of period sets and costumes, would in themselves make a long story." And he had no doubt that it was all worth it; the series would delight its viewers, "above all for its integrity in interpreting Galsworthy as an unerring social observer". And after all the *Observer* and the *Times* are highbrow papers; shouldn't their readers have known that the interment of Galsworthy as a serious writer took place at least ten years before his death in 1933? Why were they so careful to alert their readers to the fact that this was something rather different from the usual serial story—*Mrs. Dale's Diary* or *Coronation Street*?

Obviously they felt that it was going to succeed; and it did. *The Forsyte Saga* could have been one of the most expensive blunders in the history of television; instead it was one of the most conspicuous triumphs. Whatever Gerould and similar critics may have said, there were situations in Galsworthy's series of novels which for millions of viewers became almost as real as the situations they faced in their own daily lives. As to the characters, controversy raged for months over Soames—not about whether he was believable, but about whether he was likeable. In the correspondence columns of the *Sunday Telegraph*, for example, one could read letters from readers who said that the only character with whom they felt the slightest sympathy was Soames, and that Irene was one of the most hypocritical prigs in all literature. Others maintained that they had seen too many lives warped by the sulky vindictiveness of men like Soames, with highly developed possessive instincts. Others reported that all the women who were watching the *Saga* (some for the second time around) became increasingly pro-Soames "and sit back happily hissing Irene whenever she appears." Probably one would have to go back to Dickens to find fictional characters who captivated the attention of so large a proportion of the British nation.

Reviewing *In Chancery* in 1920, Katherine Mansfield said "In 'The Man of Property' what the author made us feel the Forsyte family lacked was imagination; in this new novel we feel it still, but we are not at all certain the author intends us to . . . we have a brilliant display of analysis and dissection, but without any 'mystery,' any unplumbed depth to feed our imagination upon." When Galsworthy was awarded the Order of Merit, Rebecca West

declared ". . . his work is minor. It is not profound, it copies the world rather than interprets it." But the most famous condemnation of Galsworthy is that of D. H. Lawrence, which among many quotable bits contains the following judgment: "He might have been the surgeon the modern soul needs so badly, to cut away the proud flesh of our Forsytes from the living body of men who are fully alive. Instead, he put down the knife and laid on a soft, sentimental poultice, and helped to make the corruption worse." No one who has understood what Lawrence was driving at, writes Arnold Kettle, can ever return to Galsworthy quite seriously again: "*The Man of Property* can be read today as a museum-piece, not as a living work of art." Angus Wilson says that Lawrence actually did Galsworthy too much honour; his is "a dead cosy world through which an icy wind whistles."

With much of this it is impossible to quarrel. Any critic worth his salt would have no trouble at all in churning out five thousand words on Galsworthy's shortcomings as a novelist. But as Lambert says, there is something in him which escapes our categories and eludes our analysis. David Daiches, Samuel Chew, and a host of others explain why his characters do not carry conviction; but somehow or other they *do* (reminding us that when Galsworthy killed off his most famous character, one London paper dealt with the event in headlines suggesting the passing of a real person: DEATH OF SOAMES FORSYTE). Gerould and a host of others find the situations too contrived, the opposition of forces too neat, the repetition of effects too obvious and mechanical; but millions of seemingly intelligent people argue about the Irene-Soames situation and Irene's behaviour towards the star-crossed lovers of the next generation, Jon and Fleur. So when we have relegated Galsworthy to the rubbish heap, a reconsideration is forced on us by the simple fact that his characters and his world do strike people as real. The concept of literary progress which Marcus would like us to accept just does not account for all the "nine-and-ninety ways of inventing tribal lays"; it is too narrow and restrictive.

Or is the English response to the *Saga* attributable to the nostalgia felt by a declining race for its period of greatness? Perhaps, but the popularity of the *Saga* transcends national boundaries. The sensational success of television throughout Yugoslavia in 1968, Kenneth Adam reported in *The Listener*, was *The Forsyte Saga*. It went through a double run with Serbo-Croat subtitles; after that it was transmitted again with Slovene. "Already," he wrote, "the shift-workers in Ljubljana who cannot see it on Sundays have demanded, and won, a repeat on Thursdays. On both nights the busy café life in the

Slovenian towns is halted for an hour, and students at the People's University have declined to attend evening classes. It was the same in Belgrade and Zagreb." How can the critics possibly appeal against such a consensus of Serbs, Croats, Slovenes—and readers of the *Times*?

Interest in Canada has continued, and indeed increased, throughout the series, although for various reasons some of the later episodes have generally been regarded as less convincing than those set in Victorian or Edwardian days. This is particularly true of the two young Americans, and the fault lies less with the writing than with casting and acting. Probably the BBC interpretation has been more acceptable to a British television audience than to Canadians, to whom they appeared heavily, and wrongly, typed. It seems impossible for British actors, or the British public, to take North Americans of their own way of life as people not unlike themselves. (The same is largely true of American actors and audiences with British "types".) To many viewers, it was simply not made credible that the young Southerners would fit with the Forsytes or the Monts, or that Anne, as she was presented, would be attractive to Jon even on the rebound from Fleur. With such few and minor exceptions, the verdict of the *Times* and its readers, as against that of the professional critics, has been re-affirmed in Canada by *Time* magazine, with its recent double-edged tribute to "glorious suds". The success of the *Saga* on Canadian television has been rivalled only by that of *Civilisation*, and the prediction of *Time*, and public approval, have been confirmed by an official announcement that the *Saga* will be shown again, beginning early next year.

POST-DARWINIAN HERRICK

George Bowering

Sweet & lovely is thy shape,
that not another one can ape.

If thou werste an ape ere now,
would that I had been a bough.

Branching thus with leafy arm,
I would tree thee hie from harme.

The ape that did ancestor thee
was cherry sweet for cherry tree.