

## 28 A Sense of the Past

The great mole was far from isolated that day. There were fishermen tarring, mending their nets, tinkering with crab- and lobster-pots. There were better-class people, early visitors, local residents, strolling beside the still swelling, but now mild sea. Of the woman who stared, Charles noted, there was no sign. But he did not give her – or the Cobb – a second thought and set out, with a quick and elastic step very different from his usual languid town stroll, along the beach under Ware Cleeves for his destination.

He would have made you smile, for he was carefully equipped for his role. He wore stout nailed boots and canvas gaiters that rose to encase Norfolk breeches of heavy flannel. There was a tight and absurdly long coat to match; a canvas wideawake hat of an indeterminate beige; a massive ashplant, which he had bought on his way to the Cobb; and a voluminous rucksack, from which you might have shaken out an already heavy array of hammers, wrappings, notebooks, pillboxes, adzes and heaven knows what else. Nothing is more incomprehensible to us than the methodicality of the Victorians; one sees it best (at its most ludicrous) in the advice so liberally handed out to travellers in the early editions of Baedeker. Where, one wonders, can any pleasure have been left? How, in the case of Charles, can he not have seen that light clothes would have been more comfortable? That a hat was not necessary? That stout nailed boots on a boulder-strewn beach are as suitable as ice-skates?

JOHN FOWLES *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969)

THE FIRST WRITER to use the novel to evoke a sense of the past with convincing specificity was Sir Walter Scott, in his novels about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scotland, like *Waverley* (1814) and *The Heart of Midlothian* (1816). These were "historical" novels in that they dealt with historical personages and events; but they also evoked the past in terms of culture, ideology, manners and morals – by describing the whole "way of life" of ordinary people. In so doing Scott had a profound effect on the subsequent development of prose fiction. It has been said that the Victorian novel was a kind of historical novel about the present. Many of them (e.g. *Middlemarch*, *Vanity Fair*) were in fact set back in time from the point of composition, in the period of their authors' childhood and youth, in order to highlight the phenomenon of social and cultural change. This effect is easily lost on the modern reader. Take, for example, the opening sentence of *Vanity Fair*:

While the present century was in its teens, and on one sunshiny morning in June, there drove up to the great iron gate of Miss Pinkerton's academy for young ladies, on Chiswick Mall, a large family coach, with two fat horses in blazing harness, driven by a fat coachman in a three-cornered hat and wig, at the rate of four miles an hour.

The time when Thackeray wrote this, the late eighteen-forties, seems almost as distant to us as the time about which he was writing, but Thackeray was clearly aiming to evoke a mood of humorous and perhaps slightly condescending nostalgia. For him and his readers the Railway Age had intervened between the teens and the forties of the century, and the reference to the slow speed of the coach draws attention to the more leisurely pace of life in the earlier period. The description of the coachman's hat and wig would also have been more precisely coded indicators of period for the original readers than for us.

The recent past has remained a favourite subject for novelists up to the present day. Fay Weldon's *Female Friends* is one of countless examples. But there is a great difference between doing that, and writing about life in a previous century, especially when that life has already been memorably described by its own contem-

poraries. How can a novelist of the late twentieth century compete with Charles Dickens, or Thomas Hardy, in the representation of nineteenth-century men and women? The answer, of course, is that he can't. What he can do is bring a twentieth-century perspective to bear upon nineteenth-century behaviour, perhaps revealing things about the Victorians that they did not know themselves, or preferred to suppress, or simply took for granted.

If we encountered the first paragraph of the extract from *The French Lieutenant's Woman* out of context, we should be hard put to say when it was written. This is because it focuses on "timeless" properties of the novel's seaside setting, Lyme Regis (the fishermen, their nets and lobster-pots, the strollers by the sea), and because it is written according to the conventions of a kind of fictional realism that has been going strong for the last two hundred years. The description of the scene from Charles's point of view, as he sets out on a fossil-hunting expedition, deftly recapitulates the main question of narrative interest in the novel so far — the identity of the mysterious woman he encountered on the Cobb in stormier weather. Only the slightly archaic use of the word "elastic" would suggest that this is either a Victorian novel or a modern imitation of one.

The second paragraph, however, makes overt the author's, and the reader's, temporal distance from the action of the novel, which takes place in 1867, exactly one hundred years before Fowles was writing it. Clothes are prime indicators of period in fiction (especially in popular forms, witness the terms "costume drama" and "bodice-ripper"), and information about the kind of clothing people wore in the past can be recuperated by historical research, such as Fowles has obviously carried out. But what Charles's clothes, and supplementary equipment, would have signified to himself and his contemporaries (namely that he was a gentleman, who knew the correct way to do things) is different from what they signify to us: their excessiveness, inconvenience and unsuitability to the activity for which they were employed, and what that reveals about Victorian values.

The shift in perspective between the two paragraphs, from the imaginative recreation of the past in the first, to the open acknowl-

edgment of separation from it in the second, is characteristic of Fowles's method in this novel. The passage I have quoted continues: "Well, we laugh. But perhaps there is something admirable in this dissociation between what is most comfortable and what is most recommended. We meet here, once again, this bone of contention between the two centuries: is duty to drive us or not?" The word "duty" has an asterisk against it, directing our attention to a footnote, quoting a genuine Victorian novelist, George Eliot, on the subject of duty. The most striking reminder that Fowles is a twentieth-century novelist writing a nineteenth-century novel comes when Charles finally consummates his desire for the mysterious Sarah, and his state of mind is described, with deliberate anachronism, as "like a city struck out of a quiet sky by an atom bomb." But exposing the gap between the date of the story and the date of its composition inevitably reveals not just the artificiality of historical fiction, but the artificiality of *all* fiction. It is not long before Fowles is writing: "This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind." *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a novel as much about novel-writing as about the past. There is a word for this kind of fiction, "Metafiction" — which will be discussed in due course (see Section 45).