Miroslav Beker

The Theme of Plain Honesty in English Literature

(From the Renaissance to Jane Austen)

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to a recurrent theme in English literature or to the character that is simple, plain, even rough in appearance, but which has a warm, kind and generous heart under this exterior. This theme does not of course occur only in English literature, but there it seems to be more frequent than elsewhere. The opposite of this theme will also be mentioned: the sophisticated and smooth exterior hiding wickedness under a glossy cover. Both facets of this theme will undergo alteration as conditioned by time and place, but basically the motif remains the same.

It is well-known that some themes, above all features of human character, caught the imagination of writers long ago, and have been repeatedly handled by authors ever since. It will do to mention the theme of the miser,[1] which has inspired artists of various generations and coming from different cultural backgrounds. The theme of the plain-in-appearance-and-generous-in-heart-character cannot compete with the miser in world literature but in a minor degree it is a preoccupation of English writers as this article should illustrate.

We shall start this inquiry with the English Renaissance, it is with the age that was preceded by a great deal of groping and experimenting when the gap between Chaucer and the new age had to be filled by new poetic standards and forms. It is well-known that English poets turned to Italy in their search for examples and ideals, introducing from that country verse forms which they adapted to the English language and its

[1] In addition to the universally known works on the miser by Plautus, Ben Jonson, Molière, Balzac, George Eliot, and, among others, Arnold Bennett (*Anna of the Five Towns*), two writers of Yugoslav origin come to one's mind: Marin Držić (1510-67) with his *Skup* and Jovan Sterija Popović (1806-56), with *Kir Janja*.

literature. But the relation between England and Italy was at that time ambivalent, on one hand there was the attraction of Italy's culture and on the other the repulsion caused by sophistication and refinement which were interpreted by Puritans as wickedness and corruption. As George Saintsbury put it, "the stalwart Protestants and the stout Englishmen feared and loathed the Italianation of anything English". That is also the time when the saying "An Englishman Italianate is a devil incarnate" was current. Here we come across the theme under our consideration: simplicity and sophistication interpreted in terms of good and evil. Quite a few English writers, mainly moralists and educationists, expressed these ideas at that time, but the most interesting among them was Roger Ascham, who in his *Schoolmaster* indicated in several digressions the dangers and temptations that Mediterranean sophistication could bring to innocent British youth. We find references to Italy as the country of ideal beauty and evil in a contemporary of Shakespeare's, the prose writer Thomas Nash, who says in his *Unfortunate Traveller:*

> Italy, the Paradice of the earth, and the Epicures heaven, how does it forme our young master?... From thence he brings the art of atheisme, the art of epicurising,... the art of Sodomitry. The onely probable good thing they have to keepe us from utterly condemning it, is, that it maketh a man an excellent courtier, a curious carpet knight: which is, by interpretation, a fine close lecher, a glorious hypocrite.[2]

From the negative facet of the present theme we shall turn to Shakespeare for its positive aspect. In his plays perhaps the most outspoken mention of plain honesty occurs in *Henry V*. The young king, after his glorious victory over the French, is introduced to the French court. Here he meets the French princess Katharine and he starts wooing bar. In his adress he says:

> I speak to thee plain soldier: if thou canst love me for this, take me; if not, to say to thee that I shall die is true; but for thy love, by the Lord, no; yet I love thee too. And while thou liv'st, dear Kate, take a fellow of plain and uncoined constancy; for he perforce must do thee right, because he hath not the gift to woo in other places: for these fellows of infinite tongue, that can rhyme themselves into ladies' favours, they do always reason themselves out again.[3]

He goes to say that a man whose courtship is elaborate and refined will always manage to change the object of admiration, but, as he adds,

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[2] *Shorter Elizabethan Novels*, London, 1957, p. 336.
[3] William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Cambridge, 1955, Act V, Sc. 2. p. 103.

a good heart, Kate, is the sun and the moon, or rather the sun, and not the moon; for it shines bright, and never changes, but keeps his course truly.[3]

Here we can see the main features of a plain, robust exterior and a good heart united in one man.

In *The Honest Whore* by Thomas Dekker, the plot centres on the attempt at moral rehabilitation of the courtesan Bellafront. But her honest attempts to restore her moral integrity are thwarted by her incorrigible husband. Finally she is rescued by her father Friscobaldo Orlando, who at the beginning was without pity, as can be seen in the following lines addressed to his daughter:

I shall not, till thou begg's think thou art poor;
And when thou begg'st I'll feed thee at my dorr,
As I feed dogs, with bones; till then beg, borrow,
Pawn, steal, and hang, turn bawd, when th'art whore.[4]

And yet it was this seemingly heartless father that restored his daughter's dignity — in other words under his stern appearance there was hidden the humane heart of a father. The well-known French historian of English literature Emile Legouis made the following comment on the character of Friscobaldo:

Friscobaldo is not merely interesting in himself. He is the first of a long line of characters who are probably dear to every public, but are especially so to the English. Nowhere else is gruff benevolence so much loved, whether in novels or on the stage, as in England. The English like to think it part of their national character, in contrast to the polite manners of southern nations which hide, as they think, a lack of virtue and cordiality. A good heart and a rough exterior make their ideal.[5]

With his claim that gruff benevolence is a facet of English mentality Legouis extends the theme under consideration to a non-literary field, but at the same time supplies a valid reason for the recurrence of this motif.

The literary atmosphere of the next age, the Restoration was very different from that of the Renaissance. The theatres were now frequented almost exclusively by the upper classes and people round the court who were often pleasure-seekers and cynics wanting to see on the stage the kind of society they knew and liked. This is one of the reasons why plays of this period — comedies in particular — were frivolous and licentious.

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[4] Thomas Dekker, *The Honest Whore,* Part the Second, Act. IV, Sc. I. p. 249, London, 1949.

[5] Emile Legouis — Louis Cazamian: *A History of English Literature,* London, 1937, p. 469.

Obviously the character under consideration in this essay had a great deal to be disgusted with. This attitude probably comes best to the fore in Wycherley's *Plain Dealer* which, as is well--known, is a remote version of Molière's *Misanthrope.* But Wycherley's Manly is much more robust and violent than Molière's Alceste. He inveighs against the hypocrisy and false decorum of his contemporaries. Thus he says to one of the characters, Lord Plausible:

> Tell not me, my good Lord Plausible, of your decorums, supercilious forms, and slavish ceremonies! your little tricks, which you, the spaniels of the world, do daily over and over, for and to one another; not out of love or duty, but your servile fear.[6]

As a contrast to these smooth hypocrites Manly is gruff and uncompromising; he values truth above everything else, regardless of the unpleasant consequences its utterance may bring about. He says of himself: "I... am an unmannerly sea-fellow, (and) if I ever speak well of people... it should be behind their backs; and if I would say or do ill to any, it should be to their faces..."[7]. At the beginning he mistakenly praises his loved one because

> Her tongue as well as face ne'er knew artifice; nor ever did her words or looks contradict her heart. She is all truth, and hates the lying, masking, daubing world, as I do: for which I love her, and for which I think she dislikes not me.
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> For she has often shut out of her conversation for mine, the gaudy fluttering parrots of the town, apes and echoes pert chat, flattery and submissions, to be entertained with my sullen bluntness and honest love...[8]

It should be noted that some critics have interpreted Manly's personality as the reaction of the traditional English character against the deceptions of sophisticated corruption. The name of Manly's false friend is also significant; he is called Vernish which is very near "varnish", thus obviously illustrating the idea of smoothness being connected with treachery.

In the 17th century we could cite quite a number of further examples dealing with either facet of our themse. But we shall limit ourselves to the greatest representative of the Restoration, to John Dryden. In his resistance to French influence he attributes to French authors the tendency to make their heroes effeminate, smooth, and hypocritical. Thus Euripides' Hippolytus

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[6] William Wycherley, *The Plain Dealer* (from *William Wycherley*, New York, 1949), p. 375.

[7] *Ib.*, pp. 376—377.

[8] *Ib.*, p. 393.

was made by the French poet into an unconvincing person preoccupied with niceties rather than with genuine life:

> For take Hippolytus out of his poetic fit, and I suppose he would think it a wiser part to set the saddle on the right horse, and choose rather to live with the reputation of a plain-spoken, honest man, than to die with the infamy of an incestuous villain. In the meantime we may take notice, that where the poet ought to have preserved the character as it was delivered to us by antiquity, when he should have given us the picture of a rough young man, of the Amazonian strain, a jolly huntsman, and both by his profession and his early rising a mortal enemy to love, he has chosen to give him the turn of gallantry, sent him to travel from Athens to Paris, taught him to make love, and transformed the Hyppolitus of Euripides into Monsieur Hippolyte.[9]

And what Dryden thought of the Monsieur type of literature becomes evident when we read his epilogue to *Aureng-Zebe* where he says that the "True English hate your (i.e. French) monsieur's paltry arts". Later on he warns that British "sons may be / Infected with this French civility" and in the prologue to the same play he speaks about "all southern vices" obviously alluding to Mediterranean civilisations.

There was a great deal of difference between the ideals of the Augustan Age and those of the Restoration. The things that educated people now valued most highly were Good Form and preoccupation with general ideas rather than individual experience. The 18th century was also marked by the rise of a largely puritanical middle class. Hard work, seriousness, and simplicity figured largely in their ideals; and we can observe a clash between these ideals and the sophistication of the upper classes which, although higher in the social scale, were from a puritanical point of view considered morally inferior. This clash is inherent in Richardson's *Pamela,* which exemplifies the virtuous and simple low-class Pamela defeating the base stratagems of the rakish squire.[10] But the most articulate spokesmen of the new class were Addison and Steele. Writing about the purpose of the periodical *The Tatler* Steele says that its aim was

> to expose the false arts of life, to pull off the disguises of cunning, vanity, and affectation, and to recommend a general simplicity in our dress, our discourse, and our behaviour.[11]

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[9] *John Dryden,* London, 1950, Vol. II, pp. 11—12.

[10] The interpretation adopted here is that of Ian Watt in his book *The Rise of the Novel,* London, 1957.

[11] Quoted from "The Periodical Essayists" by Jane H. Jack, from The Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol. 4, *From Dryden to Johnson,* London, 1960, pp. 219—220.

Although Addison's subjects were mostly too urbane for the theme of rough exterior, we still come across its variations in his essays. The very description of one of his most successfully drawn characters, Sir Roger de Coverley, the genial squire, is in harmony with it. As Addison says, Sir Roger, after being repulsed by a widow he was deeply in love with, assumed the appearance which should be kept in mind while reading the essays with him as the main character. After the unlucky attempt to court the widow, Sir Roger.

> grew careless of himself, and never dressed afterwards. He continues to wear a coat and doublet of the same cut, that were in fashion at the time of his repulse, which, in his merry humours, he tells us, has been in and out twelve times since he first wore it.[12]

In his essays Addison criticises elaborate dresses and fanciful headgear worn by ladies, he ridicules the false ceremonies and conceits of the Italian opera, and he says that the ideal conversation should be of "an unconstrained carriage, and a certain openness of behaviour" which are "the heights of good breeding".[13] Other essays contain warnings against fashions from France,[14] the temptations of French frivolity, etc. But the most outstanding example of our theme in Addison's essays can be found in "Thoughts in Westminster Abbey". The author walks among tombstones of great men of English history and is shocked by the monument in honour of Sir Cloudesly Shovel, who is represented not as

> the brave rough English Admiral, which was the distinguishing character of that plain gallant man, ... (but) ... by the figure of a beau, dressed in a long periwig, and reposing himself upon velvet cushions under a canopy of state.[15]

Here the ideal we are dealing with is fully delineated.

Henry Fielding supplies further examples of rough benevolence. One of them is Parson Adams, a great comic figure of the English novel. He is introduced by Fielding in the following way: "He was generous, friendly, and brave to an excess; but simplicity was his characteristic".[16] Adams is clumsy, openhearted and quixotic, but his generous heart and courage triumph over corrupt squires, hypocritical fellow-priests, surgeons, and arrogant beaux. This is a victory of plainness and simplicity over selfishness, greed and false refinement. There

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[12] *Essays of Joseph Addison*, London, 1898, p. 1.

[13] *Ib.*, pp. 261—262.

[14] For example: "I must observe that this fashion was first of all brought to us from France, a country which has infected all the nations in Europe with levity" (*Ib.*, p. 317).

[15] *Ib.*, p. 376.

[16] Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, London, 1956, p. 5.

are numerous smaller details in *Joseph Andrews* illustrating our theme, for example the domestic happiness of a subsidiary character, Mr. Wilson, which is marked by simplicity, open--heartedness, and plain manners. But in the novel we also find the opposite extreme, that of sham refinement and ridiculous elegance. Mr. Didapper, a friend of Lady Booby, is one of them:

> Mr. Didapper, or beau Didapper, was a young gentleman of about four foot five inches in height. He wore his own hair, though the scarcity of it might have given him sufficient excuse for a periwing. His face was thin and pale; the shape of his body and legs none of the best, for he had very narrow shoulders and no calf; and his gait might more properly be called hopping than walking. The qualifications of his mind were well adapted to his person. We shall handle first negatively. He was not entirely ignorant; for he could talk a little French and sing two or three Italian songs...[17]

Fielding's masterpiece, his *Tom Jones,* provides even better illustrations of the same ideal and its opposite, since they are here neatly juxtaposed in a way that reminds us of morality plays. Tom Jones, the hero, is far from being an irreproachable youth; he is led by his impulses, he is prone to promiscuity, but these features are richly redeemed by his generous heart, innocence, and open-mindedness. As Fielding says, Tom "had natural, but not artifical good breeding".[18] There are other characters and episodes in *Tom Jones* which stand as a contrast to the "strange monsters of lace and embroidery",[19] people whose life is simple, plain, and without false decorum. Such is the curious episode of the gypsy wedding where Fielding praises the simple manners of the participants: "Here was indeed no nicety nor elegance, nor did the keen appetite of the guests require any".[20] Tom's greatest enemy was of course Blifil who is exactly his reverse: he is smooth in appearance, his language is polite and he pretends to be well-educated. But below this smoothness hides a hypocrite and a plotter. The novel hinges on the conflict between the two opposing characters and the robust qualities of Tom are finally triumphant. Along with Blifil we find similar wicked characters such as Will Barnes, "the country gallant" who ruined several innocent country girls, the smooth-tongued man-about-town and beau Nightingale who seduced and then jilted Mrs. Miller's daughter, etc. Here we may also mention Fielding's reference to "elegant Lord Shaftesbury" who objected to telling too much truth, which makes Fielding comment ironically that according to Shaftesbury "in

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[17] *Ib.*, p. 251.

[18] Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones,* New York, 1943, p. 610.

[19] *Ib.*, p. 650.

[20] *Ib.*, pp. 582—583.

some cases, to lie is not only excusable but commendable".[21] Again we encounter elegance associated with insincerity and lying. In *Jonathan Wild* the issues are almost too obvious to deserve any critical comment — the very names, "Wild" on one hand and "Heartfree" on the other, supply unmistakable clues to the situation in question.

The theme of the rough diamond is also prominent in Tobias Smollett whose novels sometimes resemble those of Henry Fielding. In *Peregrine Pickle* Commodore Trunnion has retired from the sea and settled in rural England where he lives in a house that is defended like a fortress. He is a gruff misanthrope, of "tawny complexion", with a large scar over his nose and a patch that covers the place of one eye. His speech often consists of a "repetition of oaths and imprecations, for the space of four-and-twenty hours, without ceasing".[22] One would expect such an ill-tempered man to be revengeful and full of malice, but just the opposite is true. Trunnion is ready to forgive even when his own people pay nasty practical jokes on him, as for example in the passage (Vol. I, Chapter XV) on Jack Hatchaway and Pipes. Mrs. Grizzle knew best how to flatter him:

> Through the rough unpolished husk that cased the soul of Trunnion, she could easily distinguish a large share of that vanity and self-conceit that generally predominate even in the most savage breast; and to this she constantly appealed. In his presence she always exclaimed against the craft and dishonest dissimulation of the world, and never failed of uttering particular invectives against those arts of chicanery in which the lawyers are so conversant, to the prejudice and ruin of their fellow-creatures; observing, that, in a sea-faring life, so far as she had opportunities of judging or being informed, there was nothing but friendship, sincerity, and a hearty contempt for everything that was mean or selfish.[23]

Such a man is of course resolutely against the alleged falseness of French manners as can be seen in his instructions to Peregrine to the effect that he should be "upon his guard against the fair-weather of the French *politesse*, which was no more to be trusted than whirlpool at sea".[24] At another place "French gallantry" is said to be "supported by an amazing volubility of tongue, an obsequious and incredible attention to trifles, a surprising facility of laughing out of pure complaisance, and a nothingness of conversation which he (i.e. Peregrine) could never attain".[25]

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[21] *Ib.*, p. 645.

[22] Tobias Smollett, *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*, Vol. I, London, p. 38.

[23] *Ib.*, p. 34.

[24] *Ib.*, p. 185.

[25] *Ib.*, p. 217.

In the same novel Smollett identifies frankness and honesty with the English character as opposed to French affectation. While discussing the English and French theatres the author says:

> Our hero, like a good Englisman, made no scruple of giving the preference to the performers of his own country, who, he alleged, obeyed the genuine impulses of nature, in exhibiting the passions of the human mind; and entered so warmly into the spirit of their several parts, that they often fancied themselves the very heroes they represented; whereas, the action of the Parisian players, even in their interesting characters, was generally such an extravagance in voice and gesture, as is nowhere to be observed but on the stage.[26]

As time went on Smollett became less virulent and abandoned the caricatures of his earlier writings and so Hawsier Trunnion turned into Matthew Bramble of his last novel, *Humpry Clinker*. Bramble is the most likable and charming of Smollett's characters. He is a hypochondriac, rather morose and with occasional fits of rage, tending to make abrupt negative judgements about people. But in spite of this roughness he is a very kind person, as can be seen in his acceptance of and behaviour towards Humphry Clinker, a foundling.

The most lucid person in the novel, Jeremy Melford, describes Bramble in the following way: "His singularities afford a rich mine of entertainment; his understanding, so far as I can judge, is well cultivated; his observations on life are equally just, pertinent, and uncommon. He affects misanthropy in order to conceal the sensibility of a heart, which is tender, even to a degree of weakness".[27]

And this is Jeremy's sister on Bramble's reaction to Bath:

> The first day we came to Bath, he fell into a violent passion; beat two black-a-moors, and I was afraid he would have fought their master... It is a thousand pities he should ever be troubled with that ugly distemper; for, when he is free from pain, he is the best tempered man upon earth; so gentle, so generous, so charitable, that every body loves him...[28]

Apart from Bramble's character the ideal of plain integrity — considered as typically English — can be seen in Jeremy Melford's description of Humphry and Dutton competing for Winifred's favour:

> Humphry may be compared to an English pudding, composed of good wholesome flour and suet, and Dutton to a syllabub or iced froth, which, though agreeable to the taste, has nothing solid or substantial.[29]

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[26] *Ib.*, 283—284.
[27] Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, New York, 1950, p. 28.
[28] *Ib.*, p. 43.
[29] *Ib.*, p. 273.

The greatest *living* example of the ideal of plain honesty — as opposed to characters in fiction — was probably Samuel Johnson. His physical appearance was most unattractive: ungainly, clumsy, with a face scarred by scrofula, this dictator of London's literary taste was notorious for his abruptness and rudeness. His convictions would make him rather unpopular today. He was full of prejudice, he disliked the Scots, was highly suspicious of practically all foreigners, he stood for absolute subordination, wrote against American independence, and finally he was convinced that the position of women in society should be inferior to that of man. And yet this stern man was extremely kind towards his friends and the poor. Although not rich, he usually kept a few poor acquaintances in his house, for some time blind Mrs. Williams was his housekeeper, and we also remember his moving attachment to the simple physician Robert Levett. Some of the statements on Johnson's character have become *loci classici,* such as for example Oliver Goldsmith's: "Johnson, to be sure, has a roughness in his manner; but no man alive has a more tender heart. *He has nothing of the bear but his skin*".[30] Sheridan's opinion was similar when he said to Boswell: "The bearish manners of Johnson were insupportable without the idea of his having a good heart".[31]

We shall conclude this enquiry with a few remarks on Jane Austen. By and large her world is too urbane for clear outlines of plain and stern honesty. One of the few instances is Mr. Knighthley in *Emma,* but he, too, differs a great deal from the rough heroes mentioned so far. Still Mrs. Elton is right when she tells him: "Under that peculiar sort of dry, blunt manner, I know you have the warmest heart".[32] And Knightley's declaration of love to Emma is slightly reminiscent of Henry V, quoted earlier on in this essay:

> I cannot make speeches, Emma ... If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more. But you know what I am. You hear nothing but truth from me.[33]

The fact that this essay winds up with Jane Austen does not mean that thereafter this ideal disappeared in English literature on. For example in Dickens we could certainly find quite a number of similar instances. Neither does the choice of writers and their works included here imply that they were

[30] James Boswell, *Life of Johnson,* London, 1961, p. 400.

[31] James Boswell, *London Journal,* London 1951, p. 242 — It should be added, however, that in the next sentence Sheridan claims that Johnson's character has become bad after it has been made the object of royal favour.

[32] Jane Austen, *Emma,* New York, 1958, p. 207.

[33] *Ib.,* p. 305.

the only ones[34] in that span of time. This essay only claims and tries to illustrate with a number of examples that the plain, honest man is a recurrent theme in English literature and that it expresses a facet of English mentality.

Finally the question can be posed as to whether the same ideal can be found in modern English literature. As a tentative reply we shall mention Martin Green's book *A Mirror for Anglo-Saxons,* in which the author pleads for what he calls the lower middle-class ideal of decency as the only hope in superseding the by now useless ideal of upper-class gentlemanliness. He chooses four 20th century Englishmen as representing his cherished ideal: F. R. Leavis, D. H. Lawrence, Kingsley Amis, and George Orwell. Although Mr. Green admits considerable differences between the writers of his choice, he claims that what they have in common is decency, which means for him, among other things,

> plainness; moth-eaten red plush has no glamour for it; nor even new red plush. It means ordinariness, in a sense that can include Lawrence, but would exclude even Yeats. It means directness, in which irony and ambiguity and image and mask will be subordinate. It means personalness, the quality that makes every judgment of Leavis' (and of the others) so much a self-commitment and self-exposure; that has made him the only immature person to attend the university of Cambridge in the last forty years.[35]

Mr. Green also draws a picture of what seems to him "the image of the essential Englishman":

> He is small, neat, quick-moving, with a fresh-coloured, neat--featured, unemphatic face, without physical stateliness, wheeling a bicycle, carelessly dressed, open-necked, plain-mannered, shrewd, sceptical, friendly-jeering in tone, hostile to all elaborateness or eccentricity, unwilling to talk his emotions, but quick in his sympathies, soon intimately related to you, jealous of his masculinity, a family man, essentially private, needing and creating around him the atmosphere of decency, kindliness, cleanliness; the sort of man who asks sceptical questions after the meeting.[36]

It is not difficult to detect in the qualities of the "essential Englishman" the features of the plain and rough honesty of the present enquiry. The "essential Englishman" is "without physical stateliness", "carelessly dressed", "plain-mannered", "hostile to elaborateness", "jealous of his masculinity", etc.

As it might be expected, the book provoked a great deal of adverse criticism. One of the objections raised by the reviewers

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[34] Sheridan's *School for Scandal,* for example, is built on the lines of the theme of rough and reckless honesty contrasted with false smoothness and hypocrisy.

[35] Martin Green, *A Mirror for Anglo-Saxons,* London, 1960, p. 108.

[36] *Ib.*, p. 123.

was that Mr. Green took *one* English tradition — that of nonconformist radicalism — and tried to present it as the *only* English positive tradition today. This is the objection made by the editor of the *Critical Quarterly,* A. E. Dyson. But it should be noted that Mr. Dyson concedes to Mr. Green that he deals with an important English tradition; what is more, Mr. Dyson goes as far as saying that "the really infuriating thing about this book, . . . is the degree to which one agrees with it",[37] thus admitting its relevance in an indirect way. And this admission is sufficient for our purposes, for we never claimed that the rough-diamond theme was the depiction of "the essential Englishman", but only that, as *one* facet of British mentality, it has found its place in English literature.

[37] *The Critical Quarterly,* Vol. 3, No. 3, 1961, p. 197.