

religious beliefs, there should be less temptation to look in literature for the answers to ethical and metaphysical problems and to treat the work of art as if it could be adequately paraphrased in some discursive message. The poem aims at a perfection which is always impossible: the critic, or the reader, or you and I, have to elucidate that aim and contemplate the strange pseudo-success which constitutes the greatness of poetry. The ancients had at least the honesty to talk about faults and beauties. 'Every attempt is a different kind of failure', and as we contemplate the perpetual tension between idea and form in this most sublime of fallen activities, we shall be in no danger of forgetting the imperfections of criticism.



ELIZABETH INCHBALD

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ELIZABETH SIMPSON was born at Standingfield in 1753. Her parents were Catholic gentry-yeomen of Suffolk, whose simple way of life did not satisfy Elizabeth's ambitious spirit. Growing up to be intelligent and attractive, she also suffered from an impediment of speech, the desire to conquer which probably inspired her to seek a living in that profession least suited to a stammerer—the stage. Eventually, she ran away from home and arrived in London—'that perilous town', as she later described it, 'which has received for centuries past . . . the bold adventurer of every denomination'. As a distinct adventuress she was attracted by the glamour of the metropolis, but she soon learned that there was a seamier side. It is surprising that so attractive, so innocent and so penniless a girl, always ready for a flirtation, should have survived these perilous weeks unscathed. However, she found security quite soon by marrying a provincial actor called Inchbald, also a Catholic, who died a few years later

in 1779. She had already joined a travelling repertory company, and shared its never very prosperous fortunes, but unlike the rest of her female companions, she learned, observed and hoped. She had begun a novel; but in 1784 she had the great joy of seeing her first play accepted and produced with great success before a London audience. The hard years were over and Mrs Inchbald's career had begun.

For the next two decades, hardly a year passed in which a new play by Mrs Inchbald was not performed. However, in spite of some quite effective satire, some genuine comedy, and a quantity of good pinchbeck repartee, it is not as a dramatist that Mrs Inchbald commands our respect. When she is bad she is very bad, and when she is good she is middling. Her jokes go on too long, her tragedy is remorselessly transmuted into melodrama; her heroes and heroines are prigs and her endings never fail to be dismally happy. Yet her time was not wasted, for her familiarity with the stage helped to produce her two masterpieces.

She wrote only two novels, yet they are her title to fame. *A Simple Story* was published in 1791, *Nature and Art* in 1796. *A Simple Story* is the only one of her works in which her religion is at all evident. Quite apart from its literary qualities, it is an interesting commentary on the Catholicism of her day. It is the story of a secular priest, Dorriforth, who inherits a title, marries his ward, quarrels with her, becomes transformed into a fantastic figure of psychopathic harshness, and is at last re-united to his grand-daughter, the child of his now dead wife whom he had driven from his home. It would of course be dangerous to regard Mrs Inchbald as typical of Catholic opinion, but she was no mean spirit and her attitude is not without significance. The first paragraph of the book reveals much: her lapidary style as well as her Augustan approach to religion:

'Dorriforth, bred at St Omer's in all the scholastic rigour of that college, was, by education, and the solemn vows of his order, a Roman Catholic priest—but nicely discriminating between the philosophical and the superstitious part of that character, and adopting the former only, he possessed qualities not unworthy of the first professors of Christianity. Every virtue which it was his vocation to preach, it was his care to practise; nor was he in the class of those of the religious, who, by secluding themselves from the world, fly

the merit they might have in reforming mankind. He refused to shelter himself from the temptations of the layman by the walls of a cloister, but sought for, and found that shelter in the centre of London, where he dwelt, in his own prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.'

Certainly nothing of the 'superstitious' part of the priestly character is revealed in this book. Acclaimed, significantly, for the four Aristotelian virtues, Dorriforth ('his income was by no means confined, but approaching to affluence; . . . yet he lived in all the careful plainness of economy') is generous to the poor, incorruptibly just, faithful to all the duties of a gentleman: yet he never says Mass, or reveals any specifically Christian motivation for his conduct. When he inherits the earldom of Elmwood he easily procures a dispensation from his vows of celibacy ('Certainly it is for the honour of the Catholics', a minor character explains, 'that this Earldom should continue in a Catholic family') and shortly marries Miss Milner, his attractive, unstable, coquettish Protestant ward. Dorriforth is once heard to pray, after a quarrel with one of Miss Milner's suitors, before his dispensation and elevation to the peerage:

"Thou all great, all wise and omnipotent Being, Thou whom I have most offended, it is to Thee alone that I have recourse in this hour of tribulation, and from Thee alone I solicit comfort. And the confidence in which I now address myself to Thee, encouraged by that long intercourse which religion has effected, repays me amply in this one moment, for the many years of my past life devoted with my best, though imperfect, efforts to thy service.'

(Extravagantly formalized—even comic: yet it carries the indelible impress of style; such cadenzas, with a hint of the melodramatic, are not the least attractive moments in her writing.) Again, challenged to a duel by Lord Frederick, Dorriforth replies:

"Sir, as a clergyman, more especially of the Church of Rome, I know not whether I am not exempt from answering a demand of this kind; but not having had the forbearance to avoid an offence, I will not claim an exemption that would only indemnify me from making reparation."

In the event, Dorriforth receives Lord Frederick's fire but refuses to return it. The priest has made his compromise with the gentleman.

Dorriforth's companion throughout the book is the Jesuit Sandford. Mr Sandford is an enigmatic character. Mrs Inchbald was clearly influenced by the popular notion of a Jesuit, yet Sandford, for all his serpentine persuasive skill and his supple yet narrow spiritual ambitions, is not an unattractive character; his outlook gradually softened by age, he becomes at the end of the book a far more likeable person than his first appearance leads the reader to expect. The life-long enemy of the shallow and irresponsible Miss Milner, he was the faithful friend of her unfortunate daughter whom Lord Elmwood twenty years later still pursued with unaccountable ferocity. The moral of the book lies in the comparison between Miss Milner (Lady Elmwood) and the Lady Matilda, her daughter. Miss Milner, rich and indulged (until she met her guardian), was educated at a fashionable school: 'her little heart employed in all the endless pursuits of personal accomplishments, had left her mind without one ornament except such as nature gave; and even they were not wholly preserved from the ravages made by its rival, *Art*'. Lady Matilda, on the other hand, had been bred in 'the school of prudence and adversity'. Mrs Inchbald set great store by adversity (she knew it well); her book ends: 'And Mr Milner, Matilda's grandfather, had better have given his *fortune* to a distant branch of his family . . . so that he had given to his daughter a *proper education*'.

The picture of Catholicism which emerges from *A Simple Story* is thus a very imperfect one: its virtues are the pagan virtues, its religious temper characterized by the deism of the high eighteenth century. It is an enclosed community, moneyed and aristocratic; yet it has nothing of what is now called the 'ghetto mentality'; it was ready to meet the world on the terms of common humanity, and if it lacked apostolic zeal it also dispensed with hysteria. Mrs Inchbald had no interest in the parish pump, yet though she was very far from being a propagandist for her faith, her Catholicism enabled her to mix in some very curious society and adopt some radical views without losing her sense of proportion. She was an intimate of the circle round William Godwin, from whom she received an offer of marriage, yet she never adopted its principles of free love, though she was strongly influenced by its social radicalism. Her own achievement made her a feminist, but her main interest lay in satirizing the hypocrisy and social injustice of her age. This forms the main theme of *Nature and Art*, which tells

the story of two brothers, William and Henry, and their sons of the same names. Through the virtuous Henry's exertions, the selfish and pompous William is rescued from their common poverty and becomes a dean. He refuses to help his brother who, after a brief and tragic marriage, leaves England with his son and eventually finds himself marooned on an island off Africa. After thirteen years he manages to have his son sent back to Dean William. This simple and gracious child, the product of a Rousseau-esque 'nature', is an admirable instrument for Mrs Inchbald's attack on the 'art' of Georgian civilization. The book is full of conversations between young Henry and his uncle, in which the boy's naïve questions expose the conventional attitude to war, poverty, social inequality, and women. These passages are highly artificial and contrived, but the author also relied on a contrast between the young Henry in early manhood and young William, the dean's odious son, who, having seduced a young village girl, later, as a judge, sentences her to death for crimes which his own villainy led her to commit. This sub-plot is very well told, Hannah Primrose's final letter of appeal to her judge being a remarkable instance of Mrs Inchbald's stylistic versatility. The book has a *nuancé* happy ending, for after many years the two Henrys are united, the son being at last able to marry his Rebecca, and the three work for their living in a hut by the sea. Their lot, however, is happy when compared with that of the affluent William, now a prey to remorse, and they pass their time eulogizing the joys of poverty, free at last from ambition, respectability—and responsibility.

The vigorous social criticism in this book was published at a time when Pitt was engaged in the violent repression of radicalism and 'progressive' opinion of every sort. This may perhaps account for the defeatist attitude of the closing chapters. No doubt Mrs Inchbald realized that to provide a solution for the wrongs she denounces would be a colossal task beyond her talents; and while reminding the rich of their duties, she may also have wished to warn the poor not to make their sufferings an excuse for revolt; and yet, though there may be readers who will suspect a subtle satire in that curiously servile conversation with which the book ends, there is a withdrawal here, a certain failure of nerve.

But the reader will not go to Mrs Inchbald for a message. She must be read for her story, and especially for her style. None

could be bored by *A Simple Story*, and few (for all the jejuneness of characterization) by *Nature and Art*. Yet it is not in the plots that the gold is to be found, so much as in the triumphant passages which reading will reveal: Miss Milner's confession of love for Dorriforth ('Oh! Miss Woodley! I love him with all the passion of a mistress and with all the tenderness of a wife'); Lord Elmwood's discovery that Miss Milner loves him; the morning when he breakfasts before leaving her for ever; his meeting with Matilda on the stairs at Elmwood Castle; the sketch of Lady Clementina's vanity in *Nature and Art*; the story of Hannah Primrose; and the court scene in which she is tried. These are among the treasures which await the reader who will go to Mrs Inchbald for what she can provide, though he will miss something if he does not read her in the context of her personality and career, of which there remains a little more to say.

After her novels and plays were written, Mrs Inchbald devoted her final services to the stage which had given her life. She produced thirty-five volumes of acting plays, each supplied with a critical introduction by herself. This labour ended, she retired. After an adventurous life of hardship and success, she spent her last years in religious houses near London and died in an obscure Kensington boarding-house in 1821. One is tempted to wonder if this was the piety it seems. Mrs Inchbald was a *déracinée*, from the day the coach left Norwich for London many years before. Perhaps, in the midst of all her triumphs, she never found her roots again, and all her achievements failed her: so that in her quest for reality she turned her back on them all and expressed her disillusion in retirement. Whether that is the true story of those hidden years, or whether she experienced a second conversion which fulfilled and not stultified her remarkable career, is a problem I cannot attempt to solve. Possibly she was just tired.