Peripety in John Galt's The Entail

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The critical position of John Galt in the history of the novel is now gradually being reevaluated, but the appreciation of his works has a long way to go before their skill is widely recognized. His reputation was at its lowest during the first two decades of this century as the Cambridge History of English Literature witnessed. George Saintsbury, in his chapter, "The growth of the later novel," mentions such writers as Thomas Amory, Charlotte Smith, Regina Roche, and Eaton Barrett but ignores John Galt. An earlier chapter recognized The Annals of the Parish as the source of John Stuart Mills' use of the word "utilitarian." Ernest Baker's The History of the English Novel brought John Galt's name to the attention of the general student of literature. Baker treated the five novels of the 1821 to 1823 period in considerable detail: The Annals of the Parish (1821), The Ayrshire Legatees (1821), The Provost (1822), Sir Andrew Wylie (1822), and The Entail (1823). He mentions four later works and finds Galt: "A master of the harsh, terse, graphic portraiture, often etched in with a bit of visual malice, that was the gift of his countrymen, Dunbar and Burns, Smollett and Carlyle." He cites Coleridge's high praise of The Provost and The Entail:

In the unconscious perfectly natural, Irony of Self-delusion, in all parts intelligible to the intelligent Reader, without the slightest suspicion on the part of the Autobiographer, I know of no equal in our literature. This and The Entail would suffice to place Galt in the first rank of contemporary Novelists — and second only to Sir W. Scot (sic) in technique.

In a one-volume history of recent years, The English Novel, Walter Allen praises the characterizations of both The Annals of the Parish and

2 Ibid., XI, 71.
4 Ibid., VI, 235.
5 Ibid., VI, 241-242. As cited from a note in a copy of The Provost owned by Coleridge.
The Entail at the same time disparaging the plot of The Entail: "The Entail suffers from the arbitrary nature of the plot."

The most complete analysis of the novels was that published in 1942 by Frank Hallam Lyell, A Study of the Novels of John Galt. Like those before him Lyell has been attracted to the characterizations in Galt's five masterpieces, and he revealed the close connection in theme between John Galsworthy's The Forsyte Saga and The Entail and cited George Kitchin's comparison of The Entail with Balzac's Père Goriot. "The Entail is not unworthy to be mentioned in the same breath with Balzac's masterpiece. . . . Claud Walkinshaw may be considered the Père Goriot of English (sic) fiction."  

All critics acquainted with the works of John Galt have come to appreciate the variety and depth of his characterizations, but these same critics have either ignored his ability to plot or have depreciated it. In The Entail the organization of the story is as important in explaining the success of the novel as its incredible gallery of memorable portraits. Here Galt charts the fortunes of three generations of a single family, the Walkinshaws, individualizing twenty-three members of it in detail, and this number does not include the scores of others who touch the family in its many convolutions. If the reader is not to be bewildered by the parade of Walkinshaws, and if the idea of retributive justice through fate is to pattern their various lives, then there must be a carefully organized structure in the novel, and this structure is certainly as worthy of study as the variety of characters.

A careful analysis of The Entail will reveal that it was organized by the twin principles of Aristotelian peripety and discovery. The influence of classical ideas of organization on the novel is well known, of course. The Annals of the Parish is influenced by a mock heroic tradition partially based on the techniques of Livy in Ab Urbe Condita. Toward the end of The Entail John Galt admits the influence of the Iliad:


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In the opinion of all the most judicious critics, the Iliad terminated with the death of Hector; but as Homer has entertained us with the mourning of the Trojans and the funeral of the hero, we cannot, in our present circumstances, do better than adopt the rule of that great example.9

A critic should not be surprised, then, to observe Galt adapting principles described by Aristotle to formulate the action of his novel.

As we know, peripety is defined by Aristotle as "the change of the kind described from one state of things within the play to its opposite, and that too in the way we are saying, in the probable or necessary sequence of events."10 The changes themselves are the results of a wide variety of inventions but especially discovery, as we might expect:

A Discovery is, as the very word implies, a change from ignorance to knowledge, and this to either love or hate, in the personages marked for good or evil fortune. The finest form of Discovery is one attended by Peripeties, like that which goes with the Discovery in Oedipus.11

We shall discover the fortunes of the major characters of The Entail, Claud Walkinshaw and his four children, Charles, Walter, George, and Margaret, are subject to peripety and discovery as are the fortunes of many of the other characters as well. The effect of the entail itself, to disenherit Charles and his son, is ultimately vitiated by the final peripety. Many times the discovery on which a peripety depends, is itself the cause of peripety in another causal sequence of events.

Within the confines of The Entail, the history of the Walkinshaw family had its beginning with Claud, "the sole surviving male heir of the Walkinshaws of Kittlestonheugh." (V, 1). He resolves to redeem his ancestral estates, and "His carefulness, his assiduity, his parsimony, his very honesty, had no other object or motive; it was the actuating principle of his life" (V, 18). From an inheritance of five hundred pounds and his profits as a clothing merchant in Glasgow he is able to purchase the farm of Grippy, a part of the old estate. To secure more land he marries Girzy Hypel, daughter of Malachi Hypel, Laird of Plealands and sole heiress of the estate of Plealands. The Laird of Plealands is as determined that his own name of Hypel continue on his lands as Claud is determined to procure the land for his family. Thus,


11 Ibid.
as a contingency in the sale of Plealands, the laird asks that the name of Claud's first-born be changed. Claud, however, agrees to this condition only for his second son, Walter, who has a "defect of capacity."

The consequence that the Laird of Plealands wished to accomplish is vitiated on his death in the first example of peripetie in the novel.

On examining the laird's papers after the funeral, Mr. Keelvin, . . . the lawyer present on the occasion, discovered, in reading over the deed which had been executed by the deceased in favour of Walter, the second son of Claud, that it was, in some essential points, imperfect as a deed of entail, though in other respects valid as a testamentary conveyance. . . . Walter was admitted as heir to the estate, but [he was] found under no legal obligation to assume his grandfather's name— the very obligation which the old gentleman had been most solicitous to impose upon him. (V, 54.)

The immediate effect of this peripetie on Claud Walkinshaw is to strengthen his decision to tie the properties of Grippy and Plealands together and entail them both to Walter as the first step in restoring Kittlestonheugh. Thus this first peripetie is itself a link in a causal chain that will ultimately lead not only to another peripetie, one that will affect Claud, but to the final peripetie, one that will restore the estate to its rightful heir according to primogeniture.

Claud's resolution to entail the properties to Walter is reinforced not only by the death of Plealands but also by Charles' marriage to Isabella Fatherlans, "still more lovely in intelligence than the bloom and graces of her form" (V, 76), but a marriage forbidden by Claud. Liddy Grippy, Charles' mother, tried to intercede with her husband but Claud says:

"Charlie has ravelled the shein o' his own fortune, and maun wind it as he can."
"That will no be ill to do, Mr Walkinshaw, wi' your helping hand. He's your first-born, and a better-hearted lad never lived."
"Nae doubt I maun help him—there can be nae doubt o' that; but he canna expeck, and the world can ne'er expeck that I'll do for him what I might ha'e done had he no been so rash and disobedient" (V, 96).

The actual signing of the deed involve both Charles and Walter in peripetie, for the two sons sign the deed without knowing the contents of it. Charles believes "the old man had made some liberal provision for him or for his wife" (V, 137). Walter, on the contrary, thinks he will get nothing as a result of the signing and only signs when Claud offers him a guinea. "The assurance of the guinea was effectual;
Walter signed the deed, which was witnessed by Charles and the clerk; and the disinheriance was thus made complete" (V, 136). Walter's belief that he has been disinherited, and the effect of the discovery when he finds he is not is strengthened twice, first by a chance remark of his father's. "I hope the Lord can forgive me for what I have done to this fool!" Actually this remark referred to Charles, but Walter thought it referred to him, and he said: "My father and our Charlie had fastened on me the black bargain o' the law-plea to wrang me o' auld daddy's mailing" (V, 141). Walter's mistaken belief is strengthened a second time when he discovers Pleuland, where he wished to live after his marriage, has been traded for another property, part of original Kittlestonheugh.

The discovery of the true contents of the entail will have important consequences for both Walter and Charles, but before we analyze these, we can notice the operation of peripety, albeit a minor one, during the final arrangements of Walter's wedding. Claud and the Laird of Kilmameckle arrange a marriage between Betty Bodle of Kilmameckle and Walter. Betty Bodle at twenty is:

not without a conciliatory portion of feminine virtues, and perhaps, had she been fated to become the wife of a sportsman or a soldier, she might possibly have appeared on the turf or in the tent to considerable advantage. Such a woman, it may be supposed, could not but look with the most thorough contempt on Walter Walkinshaw. . . . she made no serious objection to the match (V, 146-147).

Claud is not aware of her acquiescence, and when he arrives at Kilmameckle, he expects to hear "a most decided and even a menacing refusal" (V, 147). To delay this refusal as long as possible, he encourages the Laird of Kilmameckle's long, rambling discourse exploring a parallel the laird finds between his snuff and the hippopotamus. The effect of the delay, to forestall the unpleasant, is the opposite of what he expects: it forestalls the pleasant, and Claud is overjoyed when he discovers Betty Bodle's acceptance.

However, almost immediately the marriage of the two involves the plot in a series of reversals that move inexorably toward the final peripety. Betty Bodle dies in childbirth, and Walter fixes his affection on his surviving daughter. This affection will be the cause of the ultimate peripety in his fortunes. The peripety of George's fortune is affected not by death but by birth. In the terms of the entail, George's male heir has preference in inheritance over Charles' heir, but when George marries, his issue is not a son but "twa dochters, sir." The twin
daughters commence another causal sequence by inaugurating a feeling of remorse in Claud. "This last stroke — the birth of twin daughters — seemed to perfect the signs and omens of that displeasure with which Claud had for some time thought the disinherittance of his first-born was regarded" (V, 259). Finally the birth of Charles' children, James and Mary, start another causal sequence. With the birth of these children the expenses of Charles and Isabella's life par force increase. Charles borrows small amounts to supplement his income, and then decides to borrow a larger amount, two hundred pounds, to discharge the smaller:

This [amount], he imagined, there could be no difficulty in procuring; for, believing that he was the heir of entail to the main part of the estate which his father had entirely redeemed, he conceived that he might raise the money on his reversionary prospects (V, 228-229).

He calls on Keelevin, the lawyer who drew up the entail, and Keelevin reveals the contents of the entail to him. This discovery leads to Charles' death. When he learns the true nature of the entail, he is so distraught that he spends the night in a violent rainstorm, returns to his home delirious and in a raging fever that, at the end of five days, kills him.

At the death of Charles, Claud decides to fix an annuity on the family of his first born, but in trying to effect this wish, he is thwarted because of Walter's extreme affection for his child. Walter refuses to sign the papers necessary for the change: "'I'll no put hand to ony drumheaid paper again,' said Walter, 'for fear it wrang my wee Betty Boole.'" (V, 244). The remorse that was planted in Claud's mind by the birth of twins to George, now, finally ripens in Claud's wish to annul the entail, but Charles' death triggers a peripety which prevents Claud from implementing his new resolution. Occasioned by Charles' funeral, symptoms of a paralysis make themselves apparent. When lawyer Keelevin finally arrives with the new papers, Claud is physically unable to sign them. Keelevin calls for pen and ink:

It was evident to all present that Claud perfectly understood what his friend said; and his eyes beroken eagerness and satisfaction; but the expression with which his features accompanied the assent in his look was horrible and appalling (V, 299).

Claud dies with a pen useless in his hand.

At his death, then, the entail has produced several effects, none of which Claud desired. It was responsible for the death of his eldest son. His sole male grandson, James, was thought to be disinherited. In
Claud's own affairs it indirectly produced a double peripety. Augmented by the effect of Charles' death and the birth of daughters to Walter and George, a remorse led Claud to want to change the entail, but at the same time, Charles' death indirectly brought on the cause of Claud's own death, which, in turn, prevented him from implementing the change.

After Claud's death the surviving children become involved in peripeties. The peripety that changes Walter's fortunes is caused by his affection for Betty Bodle. At first, the affection had prevented him from signing away his patrimony, as we have seen. Immediately following the death, combined now with his discovery of the true nature of the entail, the affection prevents him from following his father's last wish to provide for Isabella and the children. He says:

"If my father . . . did sic a wicked thing to Charlie as ye a' say, what would ye hae me to do as ill a wrang to my bairn? Isna wee Betty Bodle my first-born, and, by course o' nature and law, she has a right to a' I hae; what for, then, would ye hae me to mak away wi' onything that pertains to her?" (V, 301.)

However, George will be able to use Walter's affectionate nature and accomplish a reversal in Walter's fortunes. Betty Bodle dies, and Walter "sat by the bedside, preserving silence, and preventing her from being touched, lest it should awaken her from a slumber which he fondly imagined was to establish her recovery" (V, 307). When Isabella and her two children arrive for condolence, Walter mistakes her daughter, Mary, for his Betty and transfers his affections to Mary. Isabella and her children move in with Walter. George, wanting to take over the management of the estate, uses this transferred affection to help establish Walter's insanity. In a trial at Glasgow, though, Walter's act of taking in Isabella and her children nearly accomplished a peripety in this plan of George's, for the act almost clears him of being non compos mentis because of its charity. It is not until on the witness stand Walter says, "... my brother's wee Mary was grown my wee Betty Bodle" (V, 333), that his incapacity is established in the minds of the court, and George becomes guardian of the estate. Galt now takes Walter out of the story.

The final peripety, one that fixes the estate of Kittlestonheugh on James, its rightful heir, is the result of another carefully worked out causal sequence that has its start in the love affairs of two of the grand-children, Robina and James. Robina, George's surviving daughter, loves Walkinshaw Milrookit, son of Margaret and the Laird of Dirdumwhamle. James loves Ellen Frazer. As a result of the arrangements of Leddy Grippy, the first of these affairs culminates in an immediate marriage,
one to which the Laird of Dirdumwhamle is not adverse for he believes Kittlestonheugh will fall to his son through Robina. From his point of view, the marriage will be effected by a peripety, of course, but Leddy Grippy's ideas are effected in the same way. She arranged a wedding feast and invited George and his wife without telling them the purpose of the feast. This is their first knowledge of the marriage, and the shock of the discovery "acted as a stimulus to the malady which had so long undermined her health," and killed George's wife (VI, 160, 172).

After the death of his wife, George tries to "remove James as soon as possible from the company of Ellen Frazer in order to supplant him in her affections" (VI, 184). Even this plan is reversed, for George, en route to see Frazer is killed in a storm at sea, his boat breaking up against the rocks of Nesshead in Caithness (VI, 235). Walkinshaw Millookit, now believing himself heir to Kittlestonheugh, takes possession of it with Robina. Circumstances continue toward that final peripety in a tight and complicated series of events that never breaks the chain of cause and effect. Sometimes the cause is circumstantial, sometimes psychological. As earlier in the novel Walter's discovery of the true nature of the entail was the first step toward reversing his fortunes, so at this point, Millookit's discovery of the same information starts a sequence moving toward his peripety. When, with a lawyer, Pitwinnoch, Millookit realizes his possession of Kittlestonheugh is unlawful, this fact "operated on his mind in such a way as to make him suddenly become wholly under the influence of avarice. Every necessary expense was grudged" (VI, 237). It is his avarice that keeps him from paying Leddy Grippy her fifty-pound annuity. Denied her income, the Leddy threatens to sue for a thousand pounds, and on Pitwinnoch's advice Millookit pays the thousand. The speed of the settlement arouses the curiosity of Witheret, Keevilin's surviving clerk, and with Frazer, Witheret discovers the entail gives precedence to any surviving male heir, in this case James, who takes possession after another series of complications. The peripety to Millookit's fortunes is the final peripety that restores the estate to its rightful heir. Although Charles had been passed over, his widow, Isabella, now occupies the estate with her son, who, of course, marries Ellen Frazer. Thus the novel has moved to a satisfactory ending through an organized series of peripeties and discoveries effecting the fortunes of first Claud, then his children, Walter, George, and Margaret, his grandchild, Robina. Each of these major reversals actually advanced the story toward its completion, and the delicate sequence of cause and effect is never broken.

Certainly the characterizations of The Entail are distinctive and
memorable: Claud, first obsessed to restore Kittlestonheugh, then ridden with guilt when he had deprived Charles of his inheritance; Walter, first child-like and loving, then frightened, rejected and hurt when he is publicly declared an idiot; Liddy Grippy, first returning Walter's love, then at his death grasping and conniving—each of these, and many others, is as remarkable a portrait as any in literature. John Galt's genius also lay in being able to involve his characters in a very skillful plot, one that is all at once complicated yet simple, expansive in time yet organized in technique. Galt still accomplishes all this without his characters seeming victims of either fate or the hand of the author. It is a remarkable achievement, not only in the early nineteenth century, but in the whole history of the novel.

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