

*Fanny: A Fiction* by Edmund White (Chatto and Windus, R240)

2 November 2003

The currently fashionable genre of faction is really only an extension of the realist novel: where the latter tries to create the illusion that it is representing a “real” world, faction bases its fiction on actual aspects of that world, generally on actual historical personages. This can be tricky for the novelist, in that historical personages have histories, personalities and sexual involvements of their own which are likely to get in the way of the novelist who, after all, in a conventional novel is free to invent as much as he or she pleases.

Edmund White juggles fact and fiction with some dexterity in this book. He has chosen as the basis of his fiction the life on not one but two Fannies: Fanny Wright, the nineteenth-century reformer and free-thinker, and her sometime friend and associate Fanny Trollope, mother of the more famous Anthony, and herself a prolific novelist, though now largely forgotten. White has elected the second Fanny as his narrator, who purports to be writing the biography of the first. But as the ambiguous title informs us, this is a fiction masquerading as a biography: so we have White’s version of Fanny Trollope’s version of Fanny Wright, and who’s to say to whom the title refers? It’s a brilliant ploy and mostly works well: White has clearly studied Trollope’s style and renders her rather flat narrative style perfectly. He has also invented an editor who from time to time comments on the action, and has given Fanny a super ego in the figure of her daughter-in-law reading over her shoulder, thus establishing multiple perspectives on the action. The settings are exotic and wildly varied, as were the lives depicted here. Fanny Trollope came to fame or notoriety in 1832, when she was in her fifties, through her book *Domestic Manners of the Americans* based on her sojourn in America with Fanny Wright in the 1820’s. She did not like America and said so, to the delight of conservatives everywhere who distrusted the great democratic experiment that America was seen as, and used this as an argument against the extension of the franchise in England (which was nevertheless partly effected through the First Reform Bill of 1832.) White, himself an American, has fun recreating the unpolished manners and primitive amenities of nineteenth-century America; certainly these passages detailing American barbarities come across as some of the most heartfelt in the book. By the same token, the relations between the two Fannies – Wright, the idealistic reformer, proponent of birth control, free love and the gradual emancipation of slaves, and Trollope, the Tory conservative, pivot on their different perceptions of America.

A disadvantage of faction over fiction is that the novelist may feel limited to the often inconvenient time schemes of his characters: in life as opposed to fiction, things just tend to take so long to happen. White deals with this problem partly by juggling his chronology, partly by inventing incidents to liven up the lives of his characters. Thus Fanny Trollope is here unhistorically given a freed slave as lover; and her son Henry is given a life-long affair with the painter Auguste Hervieu, who did spend some time with the family but as far as we know not in their beds. Fanny, somewhat implausibly if amusingly, to the end preserves the illusion that Auguste is manfully suppressing his unrequited passion for her.

Edmund White has become known as something of a chronicler of what used to be called the gay sensibility: his early *Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room is Empty* dealt with the problem of "coming out"; the late *Farewell Symphony* with the devastation of AIDS. There is very little of that in this novel, apart from Henry Trollope's coy romance with Hervieu, and some suggestion that Fanny Trollope was at some level infatuated with Fanny Wright. Perhaps White should have made more of the relationship between the two women, because as it stands it is all rather remote and unmotivated. Trollope says, upon first meeting Wright, "I knew I had met the woman who would change my life", but curiously little comes of this attraction. Wright comes across as selfish and manipulative, obsessive and irrational, and Trollope is forced to conclude: "Fanny had not been the woman I had thought." Never really understanding Fanny Wright, Fanny Trollope can describe her only from the outside, like a rather mystified domestic animal contemplating the antics of the humans. As if realising this, White makes Trollope say, towards the end of the novel: "Her public deeds and utterances are clear enough, but her private life remains obscure ..."

What we do see of Wright makes her seem capricious and essentially cold, using her sex appeal to influence men like Lafayette and Jefferson for her political ends. Ultimately this fiction is a tribute not to Fanny Wright but to the gumption of Fanny Trollope, who, married to a feckless and ineffectual husband, kept her large family alive with her indefatigable writing of novels and surveys of societies other than her own. It is at this level – the unassuming heroism of a woman down on her luck but not at her wits' end -- that *Fanny: A Fiction* works best: not the public heroism of the reformer, but the sheer grind of surviving with some dignity in a hostile world.